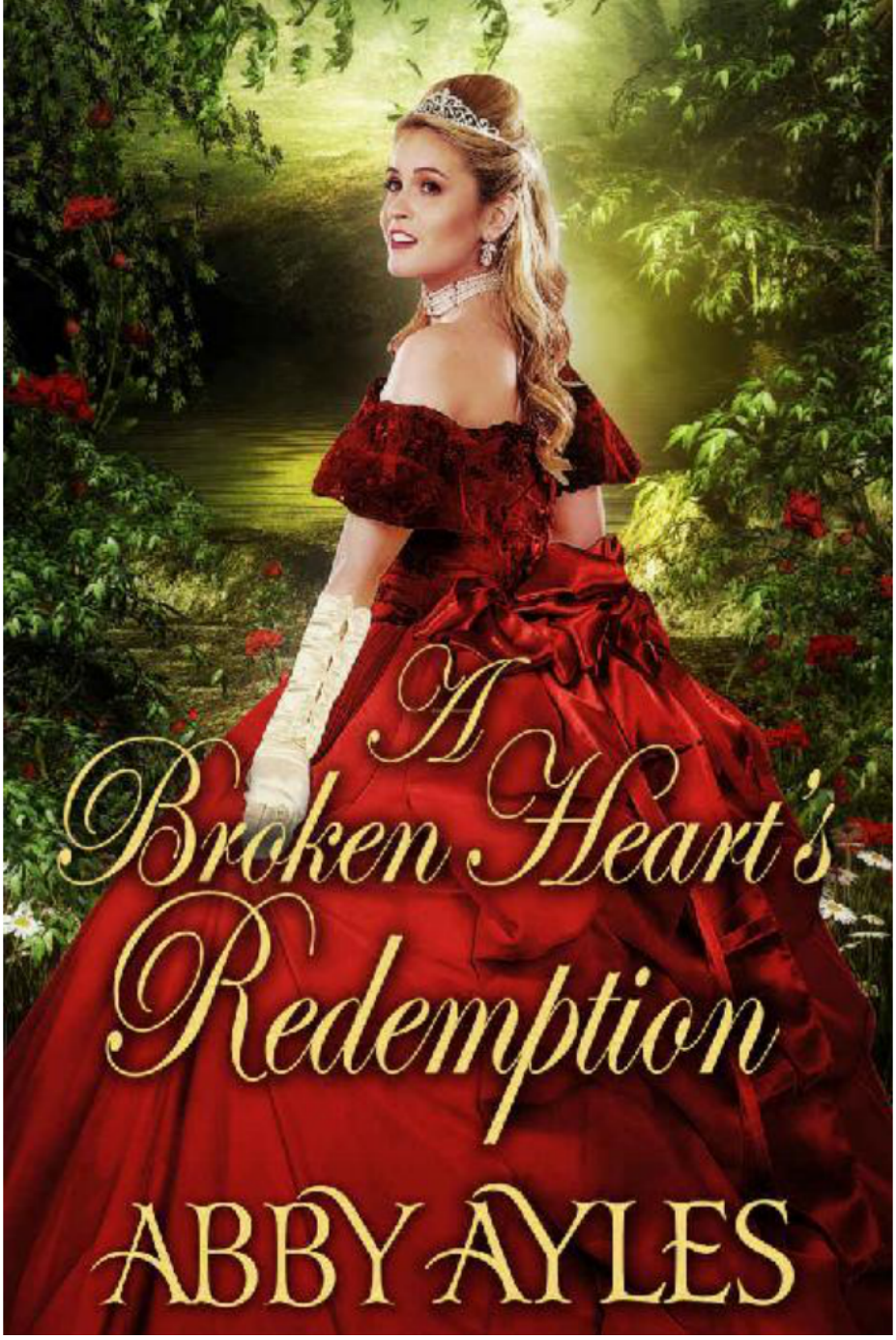

A Broken Heart's Redemption
ABBY AYLES

A Broken Heart's Redemption

A Historical Regency Romance Novel

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Be a part of the Abby Ayles family...

I write for you, the readers, and I love hearing from you! Thank you for your on going support as we journey through the most romantic era together.

If you're not a member of my family yet, it's never too late. Stay up to date on upcoming releases and check out the website for all information on romance.

I hope my stories touch you as deeply as you have impacted me. Enjoy the happily ever after!

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Most importantly, thank you to my readers! Whether you are new to my work, or a loyal fan, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

A message from Abby

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed every page and I would love to hear your thoughts whether it be a review online or you contact me via my website. I am eternally grateful for you and none of this would be possible without our shared love of romance.

I pray that someday I will get to meet each of you and thank you in person, but in the meantime, all I can do is tell you how amazing you are.

As I prepare my next love story for you, keep believing in your dreams and know that mine would not be possible without you.

With Love

Abby Ayles

A Broken Heart's Redemption

Betrayed - Hopeless - Cynical - Romantic

Lucy cannot think of how to mend her broken heart after Duke Perry so cruelly manipulated her. And she cannot understand how all of society continues to fall for the farce of marriage. It is just a means to trade power and wealth, after all, isn't it? Her friends tell her to hold onto hope, her parents tell her to stop behaving so crudely, and her suitors tell her to treat them with more respect. But honestly, she does not wish to marry any more. The more men she puts off, the better.

In Baron Andrew Jones she meets another cynical heart, a man betrayed by his former fiancée, who abandoned him whilst he was travelling. Like Lucy, he believes marriage is just a way for some people to gain control over others. Most around him are disturbed by his coldness and bluntness. But in this black heart Lucy sees a few shreds of sweetness and hope which draw her in. Between their common suffering and these moments of tenderness, Lucy finds herself slowly doing something she had sworn never to do again: falling in love.

But the Baron is committed to a life free of all attachments, and Lucy is left with a terrible decision: Must she live her life as a mistress? Marry a man she does not love? Or commit herself to a life of chastity and pursue fulfilment through faith instead? Truthfully, none seem right for her. But can she win Lord Jones over before it is too late? Or is his heart?

Chapter 1

Lucy peered through the slightly open doorway and rolled her eyes. The young man was probably around her age, wearing very expensive clothes that neither fit nor flattered him properly. He stood with his right shoulder slouched and fiddled with a bookmark.

She continued to hesitate, watching his actions, wondering whether she even should bother with this one, or whether it would spare everyone's emotions if she were to just walk away. Well, at least *his* emotions. It was not as though she intended to marry anyone at all, let alone someone as young and green as him.

She did not understand why her parents insisted on putting her through... this. Setting her up with the young sons of any and every man of some status in the area. Of course, all of them were of age. But they were all still naïve, coddled, ill-suited to courting a woman. They did not know how to dress themselves, where their family income came from, or what they would do when they were the man of the house.

She may as well have been dating schoolboys. They were that much less educated, less experienced, and less inquisitive than her. Some were even a few years younger than she was. At the very least her parents could have chosen her suitors she did not feel compelled to look down on.

Walking into the room she smiled as politely as she could manage. She would have to make something of an impression, after all. She had taken her time to dress up and make herself presentable and it would be a real shame if all that effort went unnoticed.

The young man grinned nervously and had the presence of mind to stand and bow as she curtsied. Some had not even managed this much. But then he was stuck. Still standing before his chair, he had forgotten what to do next. She waited a few more seconds for at the very least a handshake or a verbal greeting, but when none was forthcoming she quietly made her way to her seat and sat down.

Seeing her sit back down he seemed to realize that he could, fell backwards into his seat, and laughed nervously.

He was yet another buffoon. Back when she still had hopes for ideal love she found these behaviours to be a sort of endearing clumsiness, a little like seeing a kitten fall over its own paws. But now she knew what men could really be like, she found his awkwardness repulsive. How could he be so innocently clumsy and yet at once be of the same sex as the man who had broken her heart?

The young man introduced himself as “Terrence” and asked her to call him by his first name, not his last one. Which was just as well considering that she could not remember the last name her mother had hurriedly told her the night before.

“My family owns a lot of land, so you would be well provided for,” he said with a smile.

“Farmers also own a lot of land,” Lucy retorted. She could not believe how blatantly some of these men tried to win her over with power and money.

He laughed nervously. “But I am not a farmer. I have a good name, I am strong and healthy, I have four private tutors...”

Lucy nodded and smiled. “I suppose you are a lion tamer also?” she asked. She could see that she was already beginning to get on his nerves. It would not take much more pressure to cause him to throw a fit and leave, vowing never to return. “Or, let me guess, a Saint?”

“I have never met a woman as rude as you,” he said, his expression somewhere between indignation and the verge of tears.

“Then you have never met an honest one.” Lucy raised her chin.

Her mind was telling her not to be so cruel. In many ways, it went against her core self, the way she had been her entire life. But her heart…nothing else protected her heart like pushing these men away. If she continued to be mean, perhaps it would chase all men away.

For good.

She had a multi-stage attack for breaking down the focus of any suitor who outlasted her cold shoulder. First, she would seek out his insecurities by picking on his flaws, to make him hate her. Then, she would mock his way of speaking, or his interest in her, to make him feel he was beneath her.

And if none of that worked she would turn to pure rudeness.

She had sped up the process a little bit for this young man. She wanted him gone, and fast. There was no chance at all and he needed to know that. She tried to tell herself that in the long run it would help him. Perhaps she would put him off trying to marry some other poor, naïve girl. But deep down she knew it helped only herself.

Terrence stood up and glared at her. “I do not know why I bother. All women my age are just stuck up brats. I ought to wait until I am older and time has made you nicer.”

And with that, he stormed out the room.

Lucy liked to pretend that their words never hurt her. The truth was, they always did. She was not stuck up, or prude. She was not just looking for money. She was not spoilt. She was simply disillusioned and afraid of ever trusting a man. She had learned that the hard way.

But if she said that she might endear herself to them, and they might try harder. If they believed she was a spoilt brat then they would likely not return. It was for the best. Wiping a single tear from her cheek, she stood up and left the room also.

Her mother, Baroness Fitzgerald, was waiting for her at the foot of the stairs, a look of exhausted frustration on her face. “I cannot believe you, Lucy.”

Lucy shrugged. “I did nothing. I dressed well, I did my makeup, I went to see him and talked to him just as you asked. I did not speak out of turn, I answered all his questions—”

“And if you did so like this, it is no wonder he left,” Lady Fitzgerald said, rubbing her temples. “How did you ever become so rude?”

Lucy bowed her head in slight shame.

“What did you say to him?” her mother asked.

“Nothing. I just answered his questions,” Lucy insisted.

“A man does not leave the house like that when 'nothing' happens... I have half a mind to chaperone your dates again myself,” she said.

“I suppose he isn't suited to me either,” Lucy remarked.

“No man is suited to a petulant child that answers back,” Lady Fitzgerald said with a stern glare.

Lucy shrugged. “I did my best. If they will not love me for who I am...”

“But this is *not* who you are,” her mother replied. “This is not the girl I knew, or the girl that came back from school. You are different. I can only hope it is a phase.”

“And if it is not?” Lucy asked.

Her mother shook her head. “Very well, just... leave.”

Lucy knew better than to reply when her mother asked her to leave. It would invariably result in being banished to her room for a day or more. She just nodded, curtsied, and went off to have a nice, quiet walk in the gardens.

She did not care if her mother sat in on her meetings with her suitors. Lady Fitzgerald had done this before and even then, it only took one or two dates for them to become disinterested. Lucy had her little ways of getting under their skin so that her mother would not notice she was doing so on purpose. She could be under the watch of an entire room of chaperones and still find a way to put her suitors off her.

She felt a little sad about this. She and her mother had been so close when she was little. But their values had become starkly divided as Lucy grew older, and now what her mother wanted for her and expected from her in no way reflected her own ideals.

Lucy could not bear to tell her mother the truth. That she was rejecting these men on purpose. And it was all because of... him. Because of that outrageous man who had made her fall in love with him, only to sweep the carpet out from under her feet and leave her confused and angry as he married her best friend.

Antoinette, she could forgive. After all, one could not help who they fell in love with. What she could not forgive was Duke Perry's deceit leading up to the incident. If he had never loved her, then why had he given her the impression he did? Why had he allowed her to fall so deeply in love with him? It all came down to one thing...



“It is all just money, money, money with men,” Lucy sighed as she sipped tea with her friend, Mary.

“Not all of them,” Mary assured her. “Many men are very pleasant to spend time with.

Lucy wrinkled her nose and said nothing.

“You cannot continue to run from love because of Duke Perry,” Mary said.

Mary was not as close a friend to her as Antoinette had been. In many ways, despite the physical and emotional distance between them, Antoinette was still Lucy's best friend. But she needed to have someone to talk to, to share these thoughts with, to spend time with. She could not simply bottle them up forever.

And Mary, as Antoinette's cousin, was also a valued friend to Lucy, and came a close second when it came to good advice. Except now.

“Look at myself and Christopher,” Mary continued to elaborate. “We have had our ups and our downs, and we both have our flaws, but above all he is a good man.”

“It is different for you, I suppose. But there are many people who are unhappy in marriage,” Lucy insisted. “And I have no intention of joining them.”

“Then be careful who you choose to marry,” Mary replied. “Rejecting everyone will just cause you more heartache when you realize how many good men you have hurt and pushed out of your life.”

Lucy sipped her tea again and sighed a little. “But how can I tell a good man from a bad one? I thought I had found the best man in the world and that was all a facade. What looks like a good man... anything could be lurking behind that character. I almost married Duke Perry. I thought he loved me.”

“But you did not marry him,” Mary countered.

“Only because he became a Duke and had enough money to marry his sweetheart,” Lucy said with a huff. “Had he remained poor he would have continued permitting me to believe he loved me until he was nice and secure.”

“It would not have happened if it was not supposed to,” Mary insisted.

Lucy could not see why Mary was so determined to defend men. Her man was fine, sure. She was lucky. But Lucy had courted many more men in the last year than Mary had done in her whole life. Lucy had the true volume of experience here. And men were most definitely in it for the money and little else.

“All sorts of things happen which are not supposed to,” Lucy finally said. “So many people are miserable in their marriages.”

Mary shook her head. “You will understand these things in time. But

romance is not all fairy tales. Things happen that will make you angry, people do things that disappoint you. But when a man and a woman are united by God, these little things melt away and the bigger picture takes over."

But she already understood. And that was precisely why she was not going to get married. Ever. Lucy used to believe in the fairy tale version of romance. She had *liked* that version. It was nice. It was fun. It was natural. Two perfect souls coming together, overcoming all kinds of odds in the name of love, and being just right for one another and living happily ever after without a single argument. The fairy tale was the good version.

The real version of romance just did not live up to her ideal. And so, she would not have it. She wanted the perfect romance or nothing at all, and if the perfect romance did not exist, then she would choose nothing.

"Let us talk of more pleasant matters," she said, forcing out a smile. "I have seen our roses are beginning to bloom. How are yours doing?"

Mary smiled and nodded knowingly before explaining the development of her garden to Lucy. Lucy had said what she needed to say and got it off her chest. Any further conversation would only be frustrating to both of them.

After tea with Mary finished, Lucy made her way back home only to be immediately intercepted by a maid with a letter as soon as she stepped through the front door. The envelope had already been opened, no doubt by Lady Fitzgerald, who did not trust Lucy to share all her news with her parents. She read it as she walked upstairs to her bedroom.

It was a note from another suitor, inviting her to a garden party where she would be his date and they could dance and talk and get to know one another properly. He had apparently heard of her from some of his friends. She recognized the names as men she had rejected particularly viciously. Why did it always go like this?

Lucy sighed and fell back on her bed. She had assumed these men would get the message and stop propositioning her. But it seemed her meanness only made them more eager. It was as though they just saw her as a challenge, as though conquering her would be some mighty feat.

Nothing she did would chase them away properly. If she was not mean enough then her present suitors would not get the message and would continue to see her for weeks or even months. If she was mean,

then her suitors would not stay long, but other men from their social circles would cluster in, ready to have a go at seducing the ogress.

Lucy cast the letter to the floor. Because her mother had read it, she was probably already obligated to go. She buried her head in her pillow and wondered whether she ought to scream or cry. All she wanted was to be left alone to become an old spinster in peace. Was that too much to ask?

“I do not wish to go, that is all,” she said, avoiding her mother's steely gaze. “It is nothing personal, but I think a garden party at this time of year would be too cold.”

“You always have an excuse,” her mother said with a heavy sigh. “And do not assume I do not know they are excuses. I am older and wiser than you and I know how to spot these things.”

Lucy sighed and shook her head. “It is not an excuse, I genuinely do not wish to attend a garden party in this cold, damp weather. I could catch a cold.”

“That does not stop you from walking up and down our garden every day,” Lady Fitzgerald replied.

Lucy shrugged. “That is different.”

“Lucy... Please, just say what I can do to help you,” her mother pleaded.

“I do not need help, I need to be left alone,” Lucy insisted again. “I am sure that in time the right man will appear, but I do not intend to settle for less. Nor do I intend to go to some cold, damp garden and stand around catching cold for a man.”

Lady Fitzgerald looked about to cry. “What happened to you?” she asked, shaking her head.

Lucy shrugged. “I thought you would be pleased that I have standards. You do not wish for your daughter to marry just anyone, do you?”

Lady Fitzgerald shook her head some more. “I hope someday you realize you are not above every man on this planet, and I hope that day does not come too late.” She stared out the window as rain began to fall lightly.

It hurt Lucy to see her mother like this. But she was in no way going to give in. Her mother did not understand the severity of what had happened with Duke Perry. She did not know how deeply in love Lucy

had fallen, or how painful it was to make the discovery that he had deceived her. It had done damage which would not be undone easily. It would probably never be undone at all.

“Who knows, even if you do not like Sir Connor, perhaps whilst you are there you could meet a young man who *does* suit your interests?” her mother put forward hopefully. “You will never meet anyone if you do not go out.”

“I do not intend to go, and that is final.” Lucy sat back in her seat and also began watching the rain bouncing off the window as the droplets grew heavier and more frequent.

“Oh, that reminds me, Sir Garvey and the Timpson girl are getting married in a week, aren't they?” Lady Fitzgerald remarked.

Lucy paused, then nodded. “I do believe so,” she replied.

Susan Timpson. She had been Lucy's friend as well when they were little. She had remained her friend when Lucy came back from boarding school, but they had grown a little distant over the course of Susan's engagement.

Lucy could not make sense of it. All her childhood friends were getting married. They knew what they were risking, she had tried to warn them, and none of them listened. All they cared about was their fancy wedding and their marriage and the prospect of having children. None of them gave a second thought to the very real risk that the man they were marrying was a lying curr.

“I suppose you will not be coming to the wedding, either?” Lady Fitzgerald said with a low tone.

Lucy hesitated. A garden party was one thing, but a wedding... She was deeply torn. She did not really believe in marriage anymore, and as such a wedding seemed far, far too much to her. But this was also not about her. This was her friend's celebration of love and friendship with a man she would spend the rest of her life with. This was the sanctification of a union between a man and a woman. She did not want to ruin that for Susan.

“Very well, I shall go to the wedding,” she said with a sigh.

Lady Fitzgerald perked up a little upon hearing this. “Really? You think you shall be able to?” she asked tentatively.

Lucy nodded. “I think Susan would want me to be there for her. And I am sure it will be a beautiful party. I would not miss it for the world.”

Lady Fitzgerald let out a relieved sigh. “At last you are saying something normal and sensible!” she remarked.

“Well, we cannot disagree on everything.” Lucy laughed nervously.

“Just think of all the wonderful, high-class young men there will be there!” her mother exclaimed in delight.

Lucy winced a little. She had been trying her utmost *not* to think of that. All she wanted was to be there to offer some support to a friend who had helped her through her own times of trouble. To enjoy the party and the celebration. To forget a little bit about her own life.

But she could trust her mother to make this all about scouting out potential suitors. Was nothing about anything else anymore? She felt that everywhere she went, everything she did, was just an excuse to put her on display and try and get the men bidding.

She felt a shiver run down her spine. This would not do. But what could she do now? Just tell her mother to leave her alone? That she was not going to see any of these men, or talk to any men, or dance with any men? That if the wedding meant seeing men, she would much rather not go at all? She just smiled and nodded.

She'd have to be on her guard the whole time now.

“Come, I do believe dinner is ready,” her mother said.

Listening carefully, Lucy could sure enough hear the bell being sounded. She had very little appetite, but she knew she needed to make an effort and retain her strength, so she followed her mother to the dining room nonetheless.

Her father was already in his seat being served. Everyone else had to wait for him if they arrived first, but he could start whenever he wanted. This was another reminder to Lucy of why she could never marry. After all, it was probably easy to defer to good men like her father, or Mary's husband, but it would be a nightmare to defer to someone who turned out to hate her.

Dinner had lost all its taste for her. She ate a few potatoes and some peas, but the meat and gravy felt like too much, and the idea of dessert left her stomach churning. Instead, she politely excused herself after her plate was cleared, requesting an early night so she could make sure she was well rested for the day ahead.

In her nightgown, Lucy sat on the edge of the bed, slowly brushing her hair. She could not understand why her peers insisted on continuing to marry. Surely, they were beginning to realize by now that it was a

scam? These men wanted to marry them for money, or for connections, or to improve their status. They did not care about the woman behind it all.

They would lie to her, let her believe ridiculous things, play with her heart and then turn around and marry someone else, as long as the money was convenient. And yet her friends continued to get married as though these men were making such a valiant sacrifice, as though the partnership were one of equals.

But nothing was about to change as long as it was just her. When it was just one or two young women rebelling it had no meaningful impact. But she knew that if enough of them were to do so, it could make a difference.

Ultimately, she still wanted to get married. She still wanted to be a wife, and to have a loving husband, some children, a happy home. None of that had changed. But she knew it could not happen so long as it was done for money and power. And the only way to stop men lying to trick women into marriage was for women to stand up against it. For young women and their parents to say “no more” to marriages with anyone who had been found to be a liar or greedy.

And that was not about to happen. In fact, a young woman's parents were often so eager to see her married that on top of a dowry they would usually pay for a lavish wedding to send her off. This would make sense if the parents were genuinely seeing the last of their little girl, and if the wife was nothing but a financial burden to her husband. But from what Lucy had seen, this was rarely if ever the case anymore.

More common was for the husband to become best friends with his wife's family and turn to them for money and support in his time of need. And the parents would continue to oblige as though their son in law were doing *them* a service.

None of it made any sense at all to Lucy. The whole affair was just pompous for the sake of it. A waste of everyone's time and money.

As she drew the comb through her hair again and again she inspected it for flaws. Her mother had taught her it was important to keep an eye out for any problems with her hair or nails, because they would get dramatically worse if not attended to swiftly. She noticed a few split ends and decided to trim the tips of her hair.

Dropping the comb, she picked up a small pair of scissors from her bedside cabinet, stood up, and walked over to her dresser, where she could watch herself in the mirror, to make sure she did not cut her

hair too much, or unevenly.

All this grooming was not helping, she was sure. Men liked a woman who was well dressed, put together, groomed, feminine... Trimming, brushing, cleaning... All the care she gave her hair made it so beautifully shiny and luxurious. Even tied up in a bun, it was obvious how thick and healthy her hair was. Many of her suitors had remarked on it, and her mother often praised how beautiful she looked with her hair down ready for bed.

Perhaps she could make herself more undesirable if... she raised the scissors up to her hair. Yes, that would do nicely. If she cut enough of her hair off then none of these men could bear to look at her so much. Would it do to cut it back just a little? No, the current fashion meant wearing it done up high. She needed to cut it enough to make it impossible to wear a bun, so that everyone would know and see that her hair was short.

Her hand shaking a little, she began cutting through her thick, dark hair, watching it fall to the floor in large clumps, leaving rough, short patches behind with every slice.

Seeing the raven locks falling to the floor, she wondered how short she ought to go. She did not want to look exactly like a man. Deep down, she still desired to be pretty, and to look at herself in the mirror and appreciate herself. But... she could not continue to tolerate all the attention she got. She could not go to another event where her mother spent the entire time setting her up with men. She wanted to do something without being seen as just an item on a shop shelf.

She kept on cutting and cutting until her hair was barely long enough to frame her face. It did not look like a man's haircut, but it did not look like the long, sophisticated hair of an eligible young woman either. It looked like the cute haircut of a toddler, or an elderly person. She had to go shorter.

Chopping more and more off, she eventually realised that the length was that of a man's haircut. But she didn't dislike it. Her hair added a certain hardness to her face, a certain coldness, which she enjoyed looking at.

Lucy smiled approvingly at her reflection and began to trim her hair to make it look a little bit neater. That had always been her problem. She had always looked too sweet. Nobody could take her insults seriously if she looked sweet and lovely. They would think her petulant and spoilt.

But now... Now they would see her as the cold-hearted girl she tried to

depict herself as. Or as being on the verge of insanity. Either way, her suitors would probably scatter.

She collected all the offcuts from her hair and, save one lock she put in a jewellery box, she threw it all in a wastebasket that she kept under her dresser. She felt a painful pang of regret as she did this. Seeing her beautiful, thick hair thrown away made her immediately miss it.

But she also felt much better about the wedding now. She would not have to dance with anyone, nobody would approach her and ask to speak to her parents, no older man would make inappropriate remarks. She would be left alone to talk to her friends and eat and drink and have a wonderful time.

She felt she could get used to this haircut, if it did keep suitors away. She could wear this haircut for the rest of her life if it meant nobody would try and trick her into marrying them anymore. Though, on second thought, it would probably take more than a haircut to put these men off. They were not after her, but after her father's money, after all.

She wondered whether she ought to go downstairs and show her parents. She knew they would be mortified, shout at her, and probably find some way of punishing her that she could not even dream of. They would likely question her sanity for a while. But perhaps that meant it was better to get the big reveal over and done with?

But was she ready to deal with all that anger, all that disappointment, all that drama? She yawned. No, it could wait until the morning... She was far too tired to explain her actions to them yet.

Lucy made her way over to her bed and crept under the covers, relishing the warmth. After a good night's sleep she would wake up feeling refreshed and alert, and be able to better explain her haircut to her parents.

Of course they would never understand. And they would never know the full truth as to why she did it. But at least she would be ready to argue her case if she was properly rested.



Lucy awoke to the sound of a horrified scream.

Chapter 3

Lucy had known her parents would be angry, but she had not realised quite how angry. She had seen a few other young women with shorter haircuts, and had assumed that her parents would dismiss it as faddish and silly, but nothing more.

But her mother had almost fainted that morning when the maid called her in to see what Lucy had done to her hair. And now Lady Fitzgerald sat by the window, weeping slightly, as Lord Fitzgerald scolded Lucy.

"I cannot believe you would do something like that to your poor mother," he said, shaking his head.

Normally Lucy would have replied something along the lines of how she had done it to herself, and it was her hair. But she could read the tension in the room as well as anyone else could, and it was plain to see that her parents were far too angry for her to risk upsetting them any further.

Lord Fitzgerald sat down beside his wife and hugged her gently with one arm.

Lucy felt a pang of remorse. "Well, it is done now," she said quietly.

"Indeed it is," her father replied. "What on earth possessed you to do such a thing? You had such fine hair..."

Lucy shrugged a little. She could not look them in the eyes. "I suppose I was growing tired of spending so much time brushing it and caring for it."

"What a waste," her mother sighed.

"Plenty of other girls wear their hair short." Lucy quite adored the new look and squared her shoulders with pride.

"But not *that* short," her mother scoffed and waved her hands, "and not girls with hair as beautiful as yours. It will take you years to grow it back."

Lucy shuffled a little. "I suppose I could have it neatened up a little

before the wedding," she conceded, realizing her parents would not be happy with this haircut no matter what she said.

"I am not sure you ought to show your face in public," her mother replied.

Lucy froze on the spot. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Her mother shook her head slowly. "If you go out looking like... that, then people will assume you have gone completely loopy. Rumours will spread."

Her father nodded. "No man in his right mind will want to marry you if they think you are predisposed to nervous breakdowns."

Lucy shrugged. "We could just tell them it needed cutting for some reason."

"Rumours will still spread," her mother said with an exasperated sigh. "Whatever shall we do with you?"

"I shall see if we cannot purchase her a wig," Lord Fitzgerald said.

The Lady nodded in agreement. "And until we know what it is we are doing with you, you are not to leave the house, or see any suitors."

Lucy was relieved to hear she would not be seeing her suitors again for some time. That was perfect, as far as she was concerned. She was indignant about being restricted to the house, but she also understood a little of where they were coming from. Rumours always spread so much more easily when it concerns the downfall of single young women. Her parents would need time to create a story which would protect her reputation.

But this might mean she could not go to the wedding after all, which weighed heavily on her heart. She wanted to go and see her friend get married and offer moral support should she need it. But that was not going to happen unless her parents came up with a solution fast. There was a very real chance she could not go. On the plus side, it meant she would not have to buy a dress and make the effort, and would be excused. Her parents would probably say she was ill, or something to that effect.

Lucy sighed. Besides, the best way of avoiding having to dance with single men at the wedding was by not attending the wedding, right? It was what she had wanted all along: to just avoid seeing men. She could not see her suitors, or meet potential suitors, if she never went out. It was enough to make her contemplate shaving her head completely.

But she was still feeling a little remorseful, both for hurting her mother and for losing her beautiful dark locks, and she knew that her parents would start to consider her insane if she took her father's razors to her scalp. No, this would do for now. It was enough to keep men at bay.

She started when she heard a servant calling her from downstairs. Cautiously, she peered over the bannister, nervous in case it was another suitor. But it was not. Her mother had called in a hairdresser to do something about this shortcut she had given herself.

The hairdresser almost fainted when she saw Lucy's hair. “Why, only last month I gave you a trim and shaped your hair for an event... and now you look like this? Whatever happened?”

“Um, she—she had an accident in the garden,” her mother seemed to improvise. “Got some plant in her hair and the smell just wouldn't come out.”

The hairdresser shook her head. “You ought to have called me right away, I might have been able to get it out. Or at least I could have cut it properly in the first place.” She began inspecting the crude lines which Lucy's scissors had made in her hair.

Lady Fitzgerald bowed her head. “I know, but she said the smell would not let her sleep, and she was so tired she wasn't thinking straight, and...”

The hairdresser nodded. “I completely understand. Fortunately short haircuts are not entirely out of fashion. Hers may be a little shorter than is appropriate, but if we give it a bit more volume and with her face shape, I dare say she might look good.”

Lady Fitzgerald sighed in relief. “Thank goodness. She has an event to attend next week.”

“It may have even grown out a little by then,” the hairdresser said, draping a towel over Lucy and beginning to delicately trim her hair.

“I shall be going to the wedding?” Lucy asked a little surprised.

“Please, do hold still,” the hairdresser said. “This is a very delicate process, Mistress.”

“Yes, sit still,” Lady Fitzgerald echoed. “And if you look decent I see no reason why not. Though you shall need new earrings if your hair will be short. Something to fill in the space. I am sure you can look lovely enough to attract a few young men, even if your hair is short.”

This made Lucy's heart feel heavy. That was the one thing she had hoped for: to not be noticed or desired. It almost put her off going entirely. She knew she was under obligation to do whatever her parents asked of her. And she always knew they would have a plan. She just wished that they didn't. She just wished that they would be a bit more like Antoinette's parents, who had given her more freedom to select her suitors and husband.

But parents like Antoinette's were few and far between. And parents like the Fitzgeralds were common. And one could not pick one's parents any more than one could pick one's height.



The day of the wedding, Lucy was excited but also nervous. This would be her first proper outing with her hair cut short. Her hair had grown a little bit, but not noticeably. Her mother had been telling everyone about how she had messed it up in the garden and needed it chopped off.

Everything was set. Lucy was hoping it would look decent enough to not embarrass her, but bad enough to put men off. But she knew that it was likely to be the other way around. Women and married men were much more fastidious about other people's fashion choices. Single men cared much less about how you wore your hair, so long as you were rich and beautiful.

Finally in her dress, ready to put her jewellery on, Lucy looked at herself in the mirror. At least *she* liked herself with this haircut. She felt she looked bold, a little masculine, but in a good way. She was not sure how to explain this to her parents, who wanted her to be soft and sweet and girly. But she did not want to be girly. She wanted to look strong.

Exiting the coach, she breathed a sigh of relief when she was not the centre of attention. At least the hair could not be too bad. Walking up to the church, she felt in complete awe.

The wedding was so beautifully put together, for a moment it brought back thoughts of her own ideal wedding. The precious white roses clung to every possible surface in the church. Ribbons shone by candlelight up and down the pews. The rich aroma of the flowers hung in the air, and the attendants spoke in a hushed murmur of whispers, as though afraid of breaking the magic.

Sitting down for the service, Lucy needed to remind herself that it was

not all about the wedding. That this beautiful event wound be followed by a marriage, and that marriage was a scam designed to trap young women and their parents in servitude to some pompous man who had managed to deceive them into thinking he was a decent human being.

The service was beautiful, though. As was the reception. After it had all passed and she was free to mingle, Lucy slipped away from her parents to observe the fine decorations in the room, the tables set for dinner later on, and the white roses which, again, littered the room. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a familiar face.

It was Antoinette. Her friend looked at her with an expression of complete bewilderment. Lucy knew it was about the hair. What else? But she smiled, nodded, and walked over to where her friend was waiting. It was a painful, but not shocking, realization that Antoinette was not alone. She was accompanied by three men. One of whom was Duke Perry. Lucy felt compelled to just turn around and leave, but she knew that not only would it be rude, but such an action would make her appear weak.

Duke Perry smiled nervously and bowed. She avoided his gaze and instead focused on Antoinette. Duke Perry may be a Duke, and she was sure her parents would chastise her for insulting him, but he was also still a scoundrel and she felt saddened that her best friend was married to such a wretched liar of a man.

“Antoinette, how do you do?” she asked.

Antoinette shook her head nervously. “Your hair!” was all she managed to exclaim.

Lucy giggled a little. “Yes, there was an... accident. I think it looks alright, though, does it not?”

Antoinette frowned a little. “But your hair was so lovely... do not worry, I am sure it will grow back.”

“I actually like it,” Lucy shook her head from side to side, “I think I might keep it like this.”

Antoinette looked aghast, but did not say anything. She was too nice of a friend to insult Lucy's tastes, even if she completely disagreed.

“Are you not going to introduce me to the fine gentlemen who are accompanying you?” Lucy asked Antoinette.

“Of course, where are my manners? This is my brother, Thomas, and his friend, Baron Andrew Jones.”

Both men bowed. Thomas was very tall and very thin, which made him look much older than his years. No wonder she hadn't recognized him! His suit had been tailored in to fit him well, giving him a slightly skeletal appearance, but his face was not sunken, and his eyes were warm and friendly, suggesting that this tall thin frame was simply how he naturally was. Thomas seemed relaxed and happy to be there.

Andrew was built like a soldier of some description. Indeed, it was shocking to Lucy that a Baron could have such a strong, lean physique, as though he had worked with his hands his entire life. His green eyes were keen, and his mousy brown hair was light and soft. His face was chiselled to perfection, and his skin had a light tan which, again, suggested he was much more physically active than the typical Baron. But, unlike Thomas, Andrew did not seem happy to be there. He had a look of disinterest and frustration about him which suggested he would rather be anywhere else, and that he did not think much of the whole affair.

Lucy could vaguely remember Thomas from growing up next door to him and Antoinette. But this Andrew... she had never seen him before. She curtsied. “It has been some time, Thomas, I did not recognize you,” she said.

Thomas nodded. “Time abroad has changed me, inside and out. You look quite lovely, even with your haircut. I am sure you were lovely before it too,” he said, bowing slightly.

He was right that the time abroad had changed him inside as well. Lucy chuckled. “The old Thomas would never have said such things.”

“The old Thomas was a bit of a bully, and a brute,” Thomas replied. “I am pleased to say I will not tease you anymore.”

“That is nice to hear,” Lucy said. “And Lord Jones, I do not believe we have met?”

Lord Andrew Jones looked at her a little coldly, as though frustrated he was even being addressed. “I was with Thomas, doing missionary work in India,” he said bluntly.

“Ah, I see. What drove you to do it?” Lucy asked.

“I wanted to get away from England and all its pompous events,” he replied.

“I understand that. But why come back, then?”

He shrugged. “I ask myself that often. I suppose I missed a few people. But I have discovered they did not miss me one bit, and I shall be back

in India anon."

Lucy nodded and glanced to Antoinette. Antoinette mirrored her motions conspiratorially, letting Lucy know that she would find out all about what Lord Jones was talking about in very short order.

The tense silence was broken by a happy "hallo!" and a flurry of activity moving amidst them. It was Julia, Thomas's fiancée. She had always been so bright and cheery, transcending beyond the level one could still be annoyed at and ending up simply delightful. When they were younger Lucy had been jealous of Julia. Julia was bright, pretty, wealthy, talented, and always happy. It had seemed wrong that she had it all. But as an adult Lucy found herself incapable of hating such a pleasant and excitable young woman.

After a little bustle, Julia had swept Thomas away for a dance, and Antoinette and Duke Perry had followed them close behind, leaving Lucy and Lord Jones standing, side by side, watching the goings-on. Lucy felt a strange affinity to Andrew at that instance, as though they were stranded on a desert island of sanity in the middle of an ocean of chaos.

Chapter 4

Lucy was not sure what she was supposed to make of the feelings which overwhelmed her that instant. She had committed herself to never fall for another man, to never trust another man, and definitely to never marry.

But standing beside Lord Andrew Jones, knowing he seemed to hold the same bitter grievance regarding English polite society, she felt a kinship like she hadn't felt in years.

“For what it is worth, I am not too partial to the society we live in either,” she said quietly.

“Is that so?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

She nodded. “And I do not say that to seduce you. I could not care less if you like me or not. I simply am glad there is someone else here who understands my perspective.”

“Good. What would you say is the least pleasant part of English society?”

Lucy shrugged. “I suppose... this.”

“Weddings?” Andrew asked.

“And balls and galas and every time someone feels the need to gather the richest people they know in a room to show off how popular and wealthy they are,” Lucy explained. “I mean... I suppose it makes sense for something like a wedding. But when every other day there is another event we are all expected to attend, then the events which are actually important disappear, do they not?”

“I do not understand this sort of thing,” Andrew said, and narrowed his eyes. “All this fuss and attention and nonsense over... what?”

“It's just a show,” Lucy said. “And the only reason there is always such a great turnout is because people are looking to make connections. New friends in higher places, someone to invest in their business—”

“Someone to fool into the next wedding,” Andrew interrupted.

Lucy chuckled. “Precisely. It's all self-serving, is it not? And it is possibly the worst place to meet people. Everyone is putting on a front, everyone is being dishonest and trying to win everyone else over.”

Andrew shrugged. “I am not so sure it is the worst place to meet people.”

“Ah no? How come?” Lucy asked.

“I met you here, you seem like a decent person,” Andrew replied.

Lucy felt a blush rising and her heart beating faster. She took a deep breath to calm herself down. No, it wasn't like that. It was oddly exciting to be talking to someone who understood how she felt. But nothing more. “You seem like a decent person also,” she replied. “However do not take that to mean that I am interested in you courting me.”

Andrew nodded. “I will not. And do not take anything I say as flirting. I will be honest with you, whether that means insulting or flattering you, but I have no interest whatsoever in marriage, to you or anyone else.”

“That is a relief,” Lucy said. And she meant it. It felt like the weight of the world had just floated off her shoulders.

“It is rare to find a woman who is not interested in marriage,” Andrew said.

“Well, it is not my fault I have not been conned into thinking it is a good idea to permanently tie myself to someone who put on his best face to win my parents over,” she snapped back.

Andrew chuckled. “Calm down. And I do believe it is the women who do the conning. Always giving the impression you are good and sweet and kind and pure, when really all you want is to secure a husband so you can start running around acting like spoilt children again.”

Lucy shook her head. “Well, I am not sure I agree with you. But neither of us have been conned, either way.”

“True enough.” His eyes fell on the dancing couples and Lucy detected a slightly far-off gaze. She too looked at them, feeling the urge to dance and enjoy herself. Only now she could do it without any further obligation.

“Very well, then,” she said, “fully understanding that there is no ulterior purpose, would you like to dance a little?”

Andrew nodded. “So long as there is no ulterior motive, I would be very glad to dance with you.” He paused. “Seeing as you invited me, are you dancing the man's steps too?”

Lucy blushed. “Excuse me?” she asked somewhat indignantly.

“I was simply asking,” he replied with a smirk.

She could not stay angry at him. She giggled. To be fair, it wasn't a terrible joke. “No, you must dance the man's steps. How else am I to persuade my parents that I am mingling like a normal human being?”

“Indeed,” he replied, offering her his hand and guiding her out to dance.

Lucy felt light and happy dancing with Andrew. This sort of thing made more sense to her than dancing with some random man who only wanted to get close to her parents. She followed his steps, noticing what a good dancer he was. His strong arms and torso guided her with ease, and he kept time with every step as though he were directly connected to the music. He glided with such grace, such accurate steps, that it felt to Lucy like being a dancing doll on a music box, swept along with mechanical precision.

He was much better than her. She excused herself by noting that she was still young, and had spent most of her life in a boarding school full of other girls, without much opportunity to practise her dance steps with an actual man. Nevertheless, this meant that... Andrew *did* have that experience. However long he was in India, he must have, at some point before or during his stay abroad, danced very much with women. Or with a woman. But when? And with whom? Lucy found herself intrigued to say the least.

“I do believe you are the first honest soul I have met,” Andrew said suddenly.

“Am I?” Lucy asked.

“I find it hard to believe that everyone is genuinely so interested in their social connections, so happy with their lives. Everyone lies about who they want to be close to and why. Everyone lies about what their end goals are. But you do not,” Andrew explained.

“How do you know I am not lying?” Lucy asked.

Andrew fell silent a moment. “Why would you lie about something like that?”

“Perhaps because you said you were not a social person, and as a

Baron you took my fancy," Lucy said.

"But then you are giving yourself away, are you not? And being honest," he replied.

"Or I know you would not believe me and I am endearing myself more to you by confessing," Lucy said with a giggle.

Andrew scowled. "Well... Whatever the case, I do not intend on marrying you, so you have nothing to worry about."

"Indeed, I do not," Lucy said. "And I am being perfectly honest when I say it is so much more pleasant to enjoy a dance without having to worry about what your true colours or real intentions are."

Andrew smiled softly for what was the first time that night. Lucy realised that smiling suited him much better than sullen scowling or arrogant smirking. It was as though those expressions of cold disinterest were completely fake, a character he was projecting. But rather than crafting a character to draw people in and trick them into liking him, it was a character to push people away and hide the true, tender person underneath. But Lucy felt she had caught a glimpse of the real Andrew in that soft, kind smile.

As though he had realised what he was doing, the smile suddenly melted away into his usual expression of calm disinterest. Lucy realised she had been smiling back and forced her own smile away. It was natural to smile back at someone who was smiling at you, but she also knew it was better not to smile at men you did not intend on marrying.

"It is very refreshing to meet a woman whose first question is not 'what do you look for in a wife?' too," Andrew finally added.

"I suppose as a man of wealth and status you hear that a lot," Lucy replied.

"More than I would like, anyway. Especially since my engagement ended."

"Engagement?" Lucy asked.

Andrew looked a little angry and shook his head. "It does not matter. Do you receive many propositions? I bet you do, being beautiful and wealthy yourself."

"My family is not quite so wealthy as my parents would like to make us look," Lucy replied. "Nevertheless, I do get a few suitors on my tail. I am hoping that this new haircut will make me less beautiful and put

men off me," she confessed.

"I know it is not what you want to hear, but for what it is worth, I like your hair," he said. "It is bold. Very beautiful. Some men like a woman with confidence, uniqueness, character..."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "Please do not say that. I thought I had found the perfect scare-man after how my parents reacted."

"Scare-man?" Andrew asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Like a scarecrow, but for men," Lucy explained.

"Well, you are certainly not one of those. Though, if it is any consolation, you would have to be the most appalling woman on earth to put off every man. There is someone to find beauty in everyone," Andrew replied.

Lucy just nodded. On the one hand, the backhanded compliment stung a little. On the other hand, she knew he was being truly honest, and honesty was what she wanted. It may be flattering one second and painful the next, but it was preferable to the cold mask of humanity that most people wore.

Besides, Lord Jones was a fantastically fun man. He said things nobody else would dare say. He danced beautifully, and looked even more beautiful. And he saw the world for what it truly was. He was not someone she wanted to move away from. Rather, he was the only person in that entire room she wished to spend all night with.

That is, she wanted to carry on dancing with him all night long, but she knew that would give the wrong impression. Both to him, as someone who was clearly as wary of relationships as she was, and to the people around them, who would no doubt start rumours that they were seeing one another, legitimately or illicitly.

And even though she realised that such a rumour would no doubt make it easy for her to avoid future suitors, she could not bring herself to hurt him like that. She did not want to make him suspicious, or ruin his reputation. He was a decent man, the first truly decent man she felt she had ever met, and she did not want to hurt him. He seemed to be hurting enough already...

As the dance ended, Lucy reluctantly made her way over to where her friends were talking. Antoinette gave her a knowing smile. "It was very nice of you to spend some time with Lord Jones," she said, "he has had some... some issues similar to the ones you have gone through. You two could do one another a lot of good."

“Like the first man you set me up with?” Lucy said quietly.

Antoinette blushed. “I am sorry I did not mean to—”

“No, no, *I* am sorry, that was rude,” Lucy hugged her friend. “You are kind, and I know you only have the best of intentions for me. But... what issues do you speak of?”

“Well, he—” Antoinette began, cutting herself short as, carrying a glass of wine he had gone to find, Lord Jones returned.

“I cannot seem to find the blushing bride and the lucky man at all,” Andrew said, looking around, more than a trace of sarcasm as he spoke.

“I looked for them also, but they appear to have made their escape,” Antoinette said. “Nonetheless, this is still a beautiful reception and I have no intention of returning home until I have danced and mingled to my heart's content.”

“Oh, likewise,” Julia said, beaming. “It really is fantastic. Shall we go and see who we can find, Thomas?”

“Of course, my sweets,” Thomas nodded, grinned, and took Julia's hand as they walked off into the crowd again.

Lucy noticed Andrew casting them a glance which suggested he was made uncomfortable, possibly even feeling a little bitter about their relationship. Lucy shook her head. No doubt he was just disgusted by the sickly sweetness of their interactions in public. Few couples were at all affectionate in front of so many people, which made Julia and Thomas really stand out.

“It is a little silly, isn't it?” Lucy said, nodding towards the couple.

“Oh, they have been apart a while,” Duke Perry said, “let them be in love, they deserve it.”

Antoinette cast Duke Perry a warning glance. “It is still not appropriate. And most definitely not fair to those who do not have a partner.”

Duke Perry, apparently sensing he had stepped into forbidden grounds just nodded and changed the subject swiftly. “What is India like, anyway, Lord Jones?”

Andrew sipped his wine in acknowledgement of the question. “I suppose,” he finally began, “a little like what you would expect. Where I was the weather was always oppressively warm. The people are slowly becoming more civilized, but, to be fair, I am not so sure it

has much to do with the spread of faith as it has to do with the spread of sanitation and the disposal of corrupt tribal rulers."

Lucy blinked. The other two fell silent. It was usually expected that Christians who travelled to spread the Good Word would have nothing but praise for the Mission and its methods. It seemed Andrew had socially unacceptable views on more than one subject.

Ordinarily she would write it off as the ramblings of someone who had lost their way and would eventually either rediscover faith or die in sin. But for some reason, coming from him, she believed it. She understood he was not attacking his faith, but the Mission itself, and she actually felt a deep respect for him. He may be an unorthodox man, but he seemed intelligent enough, and he was so focused on the truth, that... this had to be true also.

As the night drew to a close. Lucy felt oddly relaxed. She had actually had a lot of fun with Antoinette, Thomas, and Andrew. If only all events could be this free of pressure...

But as a few guests began to leave and the room became quieter and less crowded, she was reminded that she could always trust her mother to ruin a good thing.

“But who is he?” Lady Fitzgerald said under her breath, staring at Lord Jones.

Lucy could tell that her mother was scrutinizing the man, inspecting every inch of his clothing, the lines of his haircut, the rings on his fingers, trying to work out who he was, where he stood relative to them, and, most importantly, if he was unattached and looking for a wife.

Lucy just shrugged. “I do not know. His name is Andrew and he is a great dancer.”

“That does not matter, dear,” Lady Fitzgerald replied. “What matters is that he is the only person I've seen you with tonight whom you did not already know, and you have not even found out his title.”

Lucy shrugged again. “I only wanted to dance.”

Lady Fitzgerald sighed and turned to the Lord. “It is the hair, is it not? It's putting men off approaching her. We ought to buy her a wig.”

Lord Fitzgerald nodded. “I shall have one ordered tomorrow. For now, I shall find that young man and see if we can find out who he is.”

Lucy shook her head. “It is nothing important. We simply got along. But he said he will be returning to India soon, so what odds does it make?”

“India? So he is a friend of Thomas's from the Mission?” Lady Fitzgerald said, wrinkling her nose. “And with that dark skin and that frame... I would not be surprised if he is some sort of a common doctor...”

“Now, dear, let us not be too hasty,” Lord Fitzgerald replied. “He is dressed very well and is very fashionable. I shall go and talk to him and see who he is.”

“And if he is suitable, what does it matter if he returns to India?” she said to Lucy. “Thomas was in India such a long time and Julia

remained engaged to him all along. We simply need to secure an engagement before he departs." She smiled sweetly at Lucy, who just shook her head.

"What worked for Thomas and Julia would not work as well for me, I am sure," Lucy insisted.

"Of course it will. Are you saying you are not as good as Julia? She is a fine young lady and following her example is probably the only way to get on in life," Lady Fitzgerald replied.

"But what if I cannot be apart from someone so long, and only talk to them in writing?" Lucy asked.

Her mother shook her head. "You managed to do so for us when you were in boarding school."

"But that was in England. And you are my parents. Besides, after boarding school I am not sure I want to live so separated from the people I love ever again," Lucy insisted.

"You will need to be apart from us and from your friends when you marry," Lady Fitzgerald replied.

Lucy frowned. She wanted to answer back, but she could not think of an appropriate reply. It was not needed, though, as her father was already returning from the crowd. And he looked irked.

"What news?" Lady Fitzgerald asked eagerly.

"He is a Baron," Lord Fitzgerald began. "Lucy, you knew this, did you not?"

Lucy shuffled her feet a little. "I do not know, he may have mentioned something of the sort."

"Lucy!" her mother replied. "I simply cannot believe your actions, child. When a man tells you what his title is you must pay attention. How could you forget something as important as that?"

She shrugged. "I just wanted to dance, I did not believe that it was important to find out a man's rank if we will just dance a little at a wedding reception."

Her mother shook her head. "You cannot just dance with a man, you must think of your character, your marriage prospects, your future," she said in a quiet but stern voice, so as to not attract attention.

Lucy was furious. "I do not see why every time I so much as look in a man's direction we need to start thinking about marriage!" she said in

an angry whisper. “Can I not just dance?”

“Of course not,” her father said. “Lucy, you are a lovely young lady, but you will not be forever. Why would you waste all your time frivolously dancing and socializing with friends when you could be securing yourself a Baron for a suitor?”

“But he is not interested in marriage,” Lucy replied. “So I could not have secured him as anything.”

“Then why were you wasting your evening dancing with him?” her father rubbed his temples. “If he will not marry you, then you need to find someone who might be more interested.

Lucy sighed. “I just want to have a bit of fun. Is it a crime to have a bit of fun dancing at a friend's wedding?”

“It is indecent, that is what it is,” her mother replied. “What do you think those men are thinking when they are dancing with you like that?”

“I do not care what they are thinking,” Lucy replied.

“When you are older and you understand how these things work, you will be ashamed of how you are conducting yourself right now,” Lady Fitzgerald said angrily. “Anyway, you have made enough of a fool of yourself for one night. We are retiring.”

Lucy looked around. “But I have not said farewell to my friends,” she said.

“And you shall not. If you will behave like a child, then you shall be treated as one. Your father will remain to apologize for our early departure, you and I are going back home,” her mother insisted.

Lord Fitzgerald nodded in agreement. “That is a wise decision, my dear. I shall see you at home.”

Lucy made an effort to maintain her poise as they walked out to the coach, but internally she was brimming with anger.

Once they were in the coach, her mother had another thing to add. “I do not think you are prepared to see suitors. Or anyone, for that matter. Until you are prepared to treat the men we present you with some respect, and earnestly attempt to show your best side to them, you are confined to the house.”

Lucy was indignant, but she knew better than to rebel against this. Fine. If they wanted to keep her away from all her suitors, then fine. It was what she wanted anyway.

After returning home Lucy immediately headed upstairs to get changed for bed. She felt a little regret that she was not going to see much of her friends and family, but at least she would be free from the usual social expectations. She tucked herself into bed and, exhausted, fell asleep immediately.



“Lucy, it is time to get up,” her mother's voice said.

Lucy sat up and rubbed her eyes. “Uh, good morning... Why are you here?” she asked. Normally it was the maid who woke her up. Was she still dreaming?

“Your father wanted me to have a talk with you first thing,” she said, looking a little sheepish as she placed a tray with a cup of tea on her daughter's bedside table. “He has said it is counterproductive, and unfair, to stop you from seeing your suitors.”

Lucy nodded, already feeling stressed even though she had just woken up. “Who shall I see next, then?” she said with a heavy heart.

“Actually, that is precisely what I am here to talk to you about,” Lady Fitzgerald said, throwing the curtains open to let the light in. “We have found where Lord Jones is living, and we have invited him for lunch. Quite graciously, he has agreed. He shall be here at one.”

“What time is it?” Lucy asked, sipping her tea.

“About eleven, so you must get up and dressed immediately,” her mother replied. “And please, do forgive me for what I said last night. It's only... you are a difficult child.”

“And I am sorry if you think I am difficult.”

Fully aware that was not an apology, Lady Fitzgerald glared a little at Lucy. “Just... get dressed.” And with that she left the room.

Lucy again felt bad for annoying her mother. But what else could she do? Comply and get married like a good girl? No, she would do everything possible to avoid that fate. Even if it meant insulting her parents and being confined to her room for the rest of her life.

Standing up, she went to look for the right dress. It was odd that Lord Jones had accepted to come for lunch. It was not at all what she had expected. She figured if he was so against social conventions he would simply reject her parents' invitation. And yet he seemed fairly happy to agree, so much so that in one morning the invitation had been sent

and accepted.

Lucy decided it would be worth dressing up a little bit for. Not to seduce him, of course. But merely to impress him. To show him that she was a creature of class, sophistication, and great taste just as he was. Her parents had been right to point out the luxurious and fashionable clothes he had been wearing. And she felt compelled to prove herself to be his equal.

Finally dressed in a modern, trendy, white day dress and some red jewellery which showed off her dark hair and fair skin, Lucy felt ready to go for lunch. Walking downstairs, she could hear that even though there was still half an hour left until lunch, Lord Jones was already there, chatting cheerily with her father in the drawing room.

She peered in and, seeing both her parents and Lord Jones were there, made her entrance.

“Lucy, how do you do?” he asked with a slight bow.

She curtsied. “Very well, and you?”

“Very fair, thank you,” he replied, straightening himself and smiling at her. Again, the smile seemed falsely arrogant.

He looked pretty good again. It was clear he either had plenty of money, or was a man of fine taste who would compromise other things to avoid compromising on style. It was something she would normally hold against a man, that he was better dressed and cared more for his clothes than she did. She usually viewed it as unmanly to be so frivolous. But in him it was, if not good, a forgivable flaw. After all, nobody was perfect.

Besides, it was easy to forgive flaws in someone you did not intend on marrying. He did not even have to be perfect. He just had to be good conversation, and a fun dancer.

“I had a wonderful time at the reception last night, even if the couple of the hour was there for less than an hour,” Andrew remarked. His eyes briefly landed on Lucy, as though asking for her approval.

She just blushed and looked aside, not quite sure how to interpret this gaze.

“Many couples are very eager to begin their new life together,” Lord Fitzgerald said. “I know I was. And it is rare for a reception to be held so late into the night.”

Andrew nodded. “I find it a little ridiculous for a wedding to go on all

day, though. In my opinion it should be between the bride and groom and their families, not some big affair for the whole town."

Lady Fitzgerald shook her head. "No, you must invite some people of status, you cannot ignore them. Think of how insulted local Barons, Earls, and Dukes would be if they were not invited to your wedding?"

"I would trust that my friends would understand my desire for a private, intimate event," Andrew said with a shrug.

"But not everyone is your friend," Lady Fitzgerald replied.

"Then why on earth would I invite them to my wedding?" Andrew replied.

Lady Fitzgerald cast him a disapproving glance, but when she looked to her husband he only shrugged, so she did not add anything else.

"Let us go through to the dining room," Lord Fitzgerald said, waving towards the door. "It is almost time for lunch."

As her parents walked out ahead, Lucy walked beside Lord Jones. "Do you really mean it when you say things like that, or do you only intend to shock?" she asked quietly.

He shrugged. "I only say what I genuinely think. But I am possibly more liberal when it comes to sharing the thoughts which ruffle feathers the most." Again, his eyes met hers, asking for her to agree with him.

"Why do you like offending people?" Lucy asked.

"Because it is fun." Andrew waved a hand in a playful circle. Something about the gesture seemed contrived to Lucy, like he was putting on an act.

"Hardly." she scrunched her face is disapproval. "You drive a wedge between yourself and those who would love and care for you. You deeply hurt more sensitive people. And you make yourself look completely lacking in compassion and consideration."

He seemed somewhat taken aback at the lack of support she showed. But quickly his face became calm again. "But consider this," he replied, "that those who would distance themselves from you for your thoughts are unworthy of your company, those that are sensitive deserve to be hardened, and compassion and consideration ought to be reserved for those who show it to you."

Lucy could not find fault with his analysis. But it still didn't feel right to her. Whenever she hurt her mother's feelings she felt it deeply in

her heart. Whenever she broke a suitor's heart she regretted it for days. She acknowledged that sometimes insulting someone was the only way to make your lack of interest clear, but she took no pleasure in it and longed to return to the days when she was sweeter and kinder, according to her true nature.

As the entrees were served, Lord Fitzgerald turned to face Lord Jones. “I was wondering,” he began, “if I might ask you a question.”

“Of course, feel free.”

“I saw that you and my daughter, Lucy were dancing and talking quite a bit last night,” he said. “You seemed to be enjoying yourselves.”

“Yes, she is a terrible dancer but it was great fun.” There was subtle warmth to his tone of voice.

“And I have heard from some friends of mine that you are currently unattached? After—”

“Yes, I am,” Andrew interrupted, smiling in a way which suggested he, like everyone else at the table, knew where the conversation was going. He was just allowing Lord Fitzgerald to finish what he was saying out of politeness.

“I was wondering if perhaps you would like to court our daughter,” Lord Fitzgerald said.

And it was then that the politeness ended. Lord Jones burst out laughing.

Lord and Lady Fitzgerald cast one another an indignant look, then their faces returned to a forced expression of politeness and they looked back at Andrew, who drew a deep breath and sipped his wine. “No thank you, I have no intention of marrying.”

Were he anyone else, Lucy knew that they would certainly have kicked him out for that display. But they had to remain cordial towards him, so they just nodded in bewilderment.

Chapter 6

As Lucy's parents tried to work out what to do or say next, Lucy looked to Andrew. He certainly appeared to be enjoying the distress he had caused. But a part of her mind was telling her that it seemed a little... acted out. Like he did not truly enjoy it, or did not enjoy it as much as he was showing he did.

She smiled at him and he smiled back. It was that same gentle smile she had seen during the dance. But then he repressed it and his face went a bit blank again. He sipped his wine.

“I am sure if you found the right woman...” Lady Fitzgerald began before trailing off.

Andrew was shaking his head. “There is no such woman. There is no woman alive on this planet who is worth the trials and tribulations of courtship, let alone of marriage.” Yet in his voice Lucy could hear a hint of pain and sadness.

She knew she should have felt insulted by this. But she was not. The words he said and how he said them did not add up. He was still... oddly intriguing. Sure, he had just outright stated that she, as a woman, was not worth the trouble she would bring. But she felt the same way about men, and she could not despise him for being wary of marriage. If anything, she wanted to know why. She wanted to know if he had been hurt like she had, or seen someone else get hurt.

Over the course of lunch the conversation turned to somewhat less stressful topics for Lucy, such as upcoming events and Antoinette's baby, who was apparently growing well. By the end, Lord Fitzgerald asked whether anyone would like coffee, spirits, or a cigar after dinner.

“I'm not sure about anyone else, but I think a coffee would be fantastic,” Andrew said.

Lucy hesitated. “I suppose I shall also have a coffee,” she said.

Her mother cast an odd glance her way. “Are you sure, Lucy? You usually drink nothing but tea. And I heard it was not ladylike to drink coffee.”

“Nonsense,” Andrew replied, “young girls today drink plenty of coffee. It is all the rage.”

The idea it was something not only rebellious and masculine, but also very trendy, made her more eager to try it.

Walking through into the drawing room, Andrew did not need to be shown to a seat, instead sitting down in the middle of one of the sofas, so that someone would have to sit by his side or else all three would be crammed in the other sofa, awkwardly facing him.

Lord Fitzgerald sat down beside Andrew, Lucy opposite him, and Lady Fitzgerald next to Lucy, opposite her husband. Lucy had felt tempted to sit down beside Andrew, but her father had clearly seen that as inappropriate and taken the seat for himself. Lucy would have to do with sitting opposite him.

As a servant went to bring the coffees and a cigar for Lord Fitzgerald, Andrew seemed to be settling in comfortably.

“What persuaded you so strongly against marriage?” Lady Fitzgerald said.

Andrew shrugged and shook his head. “It is none of your business, to be honest. And I am sure you shall eventually find out, or hear some dreadful rumour, but I would rather your husband tell you in secret than speak about it myself.”

Lucy once again realised that the only reason they tolerated him was because he was a Baron. If anyone else spoke to them like that they would be indignant. And normally other people of status were more respectful. But for some reason Lord Jones felt he was separate from normal society, and therefore above it.

This was rather annoying to Lucy. She knew him to be intelligent, and she had seen he was capable of kindness and warmth. So why was he so intent on offending people? He was so much more than just an arrogant young man, and yet he refused to show a side to him which other people would respect. It was frustrating to see him waste so much potential for no apparent reason. She could not bring herself to stop liking him. But she wished he made more of an effort to be likeable to others.

When the coffee arrived the aroma was strong and the taste was stronger. She was not used to it, but she wanted to seem sophisticated in front of such an intelligent, witty, daring man. So she sipped it and made an effort not to wince when, even with cream and sugar, it tasted of nothing but burnt toast to her.

“I do believe we should leave you two to talk a while,” Lady Fitzgerald finally said.

Lord Fitzgerald beckoned a servant over. “Stand as chaperone until we return,” he said with a nod.

Lucy and Andrew watched as her parents left the room and shut the door. It was clear they expected something intimate to happen. Andrew just shook his head and chuckled.

“A chaperone? It seems your parents have not given up hope,” he said.

Lucy shook her head too. “They do genuinely wish for me to be married one day,” she said.

“And yet even after you have told them they continue to try and set you up with suitors?” Andrew asked, stepping in a little closer.

Lucy averted her gaze nervously, noticing the disapproving stare of the servant and moving back a little. “Not exactly...”

“Oh,” he said in realization, “you mean to say you have not yet told them?”

Lucy shrugged a little and sipped her coffee again. “It is different for women than for men. We cannot simply say we do not wish to be married. It is frowned upon for a woman to live her life out unwed. Especially if she has no brothers to care for her.”

“I do not care what is frowned upon,” Andrew replied with a smirk. “If I were you I would tell them anyway. It is better than letting them suffer in ignorance.”

Lucy shrugged again. “You are, however, not me. And I am not you. And I am not prepared to hurt my parents like that.”

“Suit yourself,” Andrew replied and sipped his coffee.

“Why did you even agree to visit if you are not interested?” Lucy asked.

“I am interested in you, just not as a wife,” Andrew replied.

Lucy glared at him, mortified. How dare he suggest that...

Andrew grew a little pale and shook his head earnestly. “No, no, not that. I mean, I wish for you to be my friend. We have much in common, and I enjoy talking to you.” He smiled and again there was that warmth she had seen earlier. It beckoned her in.

“But my parents think you may want to court me,” she replied.

“Then let them think so. If it means we are allowed to talk in private then I am prepared to let them believe anything.” He grinned.

It made sense, in a way. “But men and women cannot be friends, you do know this?”

“Why not?” Andrew asked.

“Because it is inappropriate. People would talk,” Lucy replied. She was starting to feel a little uncomfortable again, but she was also enjoying the closeness and slight gentility that she was managing to get out of him.

Andrew shrugged. “Then let them talk. People talk about your hair. People talk about my rudeness. Are we dead yet? Or does it eventually stop mattering?”

Lucy sighed. He was right. Of course he was right. And so smart. But... “It does matter, though. I may be treated differently.”

“You may end up with fewer suitors if they think you are having an affair with me,” Lord Jones insisted.

Lucy shook her head. “Just... be discreet. I am not yet ready to become as infamous as you seem to wish to be.”

“I will be discreet, in that case. You are rather sweet, deep down, are you not?”

Lucy shook her head. He did not understand. But that didn't matter. It felt good to be considering Lord Jones as a friend. A little voice in the back of her mind told her he could be so much more, but she dismissed it. He could never be anything more. She was not ready for something like that. She never would be ready. It could still easily all be a trick.

“If you have no intention of marrying, then I suppose I do not mind, personally,” Lucy said. “But do not get any ideas if I am nice to you. I am just being friendly.”

“Likewise when I am friendly. I shall treat you as a man. You already have the haircut.”

Lucy scowled a little. But really, she did not mind the teasing. He was sort of funny. Lucy looked up at Andrew. “Why is it that you do not wish to marry? If you do not mind my asking.”

He sighed and shook his head. “I do not mind you asking, but... I also would rather not talk about it. Must you know?”

“If we are to be friends I would rather you not keep complete secrets from me,” Lucy replied. “I do not mind if you do not wish to tell me everything, but... I just want to know.”

“How about you begin, then?” he asked. “Tell me why you are so averse to marriage.”

Lucy sighed. “Very well... I once had a suitor by the name of Mr Perry. And he was sweet and kind and I believed him to be in every way perfect for me. I fell in love with him. But he did not love me, he loved someone else. My parents saw potential in him and were willing to consider him despite his lack of a title, whereas her parents were not. But then by a stroke of fortune he became a Duke. And he married my friend, the woman he loved.”

Andrew stared a second and put two and two together. “*That* Duke Perry?”

She nodded.

“Well, I certainly understand your apprehension. Are you not angry with her?” he asked.

Lucy shook her head. “They are in love. I cannot blame them for that. What upset me was that he was willing to lie to me, to seduce me, and to enter a loveless marriage for money. I was almost eternally wed to a man who would never love me.”

Andrew took a deep breath. “I understand.”

“And now it is your turn,” she said with a soft smile.

“Yes, it is,” he said. There was a slightly nervous quality to his voice that she realised was actually rather endearing. The hard facade had broken and let out another glimpse of the softer man behind it all.

She smiled at him when he glanced in her direction, and he smiled back, another soft, genuine smile.

He drew a deep breath. “When I went to India, I, like Thomas, was engaged to be married. She was lovely, everything I wished for. We would be away a year, eighteen months at the most, and then return and marry our sweethearts. At least that is what I thought. I wrote to

her every single day, and she replied to me every day, and she never said anything to suggest she was no longer in love with me, or that she had changed her mind. And yet when I returned I found out from her parents that she had ended the engagement, without even telling me, and was seeing another suitor."

"Oh dear," Lucy replied, not sure what else to say. "Did you see her?"

He nodded. "I thought it was all a plot by her parents. So I insisted on seeing her. And when I did she says she had grown tired of waiting and only continued writing the letters to spare me my feelings."

"I suppose she was foolish."

"Foolish?" he replied. "She was manipulative and cruel and she knows it. That is why I shall never put my faith in a woman again, so long as I live."

"Just because one woman insulted you does not mean every woman will," Lucy replied indignantly.

"And just because one man betrayed you does not mean every man will," Andrew said. "But if you have a fool proof method of sorting the wheat from the chaff then I would love to hear it."

Lucy nodded. "No, I agree with you. But I am sure there must be good women out there. I am one."

"Every woman thinks she is a good woman," Andrew replied bluntly.

"But you seem to agree with me on that," Lucy said. She was not sure why she was so intent on defending herself as a marriage prospect. She told herself it was probably more to do with the personal insult than with any real interest.

"I suppose so," he admitted, his cheeks flushing a little. "Nevertheless, it is wise not to fall for all that nonsense. We must remain strong against it."

"Absolutely. Just because I know I would make a good wife does not mean I wish to be one. After all, how can I trust that the man I marry will be a good husband? Marriage is an eternal contract. Not even taxes are that unforgiving."

"Exactly, the only thing less forgiving than marriage is death," Andrew chuckled.

Lucy blushed a little as she laughed too. "Perhaps, then, we ought to form a pact."

“A pact?” Andrew asked.

“That we shall never marry. A bit like how the Sisters at the boarding school agreed to watch over one another and deter them from sin if temptation should arise,” she explained.

“Ah, yes, the other Missionaries did a similar thing. Sometimes we would have women with us, and whether we were men of the cloth or not, the women would tempt us. So we committed to talking one another out of it were the temptation too strong,” Andrew replied.

“Then is it agreed?” Lucy asked.

“Of course. Should either of us ever become so foolish as to start considering marriage, then it is the other's duty to ensure they see reason.”

It felt a little strange to have formed such a pact. But it also made a lot of sense to Lucy. This way not only was she reassured that he would not ask her parents for her hand, but they could help the other to achieve their goal of forever dodging marriage. It was perfect.

The thought crossed her mind that perhaps she would want to marry some day, or that maybe Lord Jones was doing this only to get close to her. But it was too late to go back on the pact. And besides, it was better for her to have him by her side than against her.

Chapter 7

Lord Jones's visit drew to a close before dinner, which somewhat upset Lord and Lady Fitzgerald. They seemed to have been assuming he would stay for the rest of the day. They plied him with coffees and cigars in the hopes he would stay a little longer, but after his third cup of coffee he insisted he needed to leave.

“You have been most gracious hosts, and I truly appreciate how well you have cared for me, but I have already stayed far longer than I intended to,” he insisted.

“Are you certain you will not stay for dinner?” Lady Fitzgerald asked, sounding disappointed.

“I am sorry, but I am a little busy this evening,” Lord Jones said.

Lucy was a little surprised to say the least by the change in attitude both her parents and Andrew were displaying. It was as though they were all completely different people all of a sudden. Her parents, who would never have tolerated Andrew's behaviour from anyone else, not only would not evict him from their home, but were asking him to stay longer. And Andrew, who had been fairly rude all afternoon, was suddenly very collected and polite. It seemed the rules of conventional society did sometimes apply to him after all.

“Would you like to stop by again sometime?” Lady Fitzgerald asked.

Andrew smiled. “Of course. I could visit again for tea tomorrow, if you would like? Or you could visit me?”

Lady Fitzgerald nodded. “It would be lovely to see your home,” she said.

“I am sure it would,” Andrew replied in a tone of voice which suggested he knew her sole intent was to snoop.

This seemed to have been missed by Lady Fitzgerald who just smiled. “Lucy, be a dear and see Lord Jones to the door.”

Lucy followed him as he walked over to where a servant was

presenting his coat. She was a little embarrassed by her parents' desperation to keep him around.

“I am sorry they are so... needy,” she said. “Normally they are not this bad with any of my suitors.”

He shrugged. “Never mind. I am sure it is just because I said I did not intend on marrying anyone, so they are all the more desperate to change my mind.”

Lucy sighed. “I hardly think that is the way one would go about changing your mind...”

“Ah, but you understand me, they do not,” he explained.

“I only hope they are not so bad when we next meet,” Lucy replied. “For what it is worth, it was nice having you.”

“And it was nice spending time here also. I shall see you again tomorrow,” Andrew said with another of his gentler smiles.

Lucy was not sure why, but as he walked off she felt a little weak. Perhaps it was the coffee. It had made her heart beat so fast, and given her a little bit of a stomach ache. So it was probably making her giddy too.

As a servant closed the door, she made her way into the front room and lay down on a chaise longue, looking up at the ceiling. What a strange sensation. She ought to remind herself not to drink coffee again. But... When she was at Andrew's house she would have to. She wanted him to think she was a modern, strong girl, like the ones he had mentioned. And she could hardly say she disliked coffee now that she had drank some in front of him.

Nevertheless, Lucy was glad that her friend would continue to see her. And especially glad that she would soon see his home, for, despite her disgust at her mother's desire to snoop, she was a little curious herself. She knew full well why her mother had pressed for him to visit more often, but she also knew he would remain true to his conviction. No matter what her parents said or did, he had no intention of marrying.

He was especially the worst person for them to pursue for a proposal since the pact. Not only were they trying to get a man who was completely against marriage to court her, but he was also committed to helping *her* avoid marriage. In the time they were supposed to be courting he could help her evade her usual range of suitors.

“Are you alright, Lucy?” her mother's voice sounded in the doorway. “Did you eat too much? Do you have indigestion?”

Lucy sat up a little. “I think it was the coffee,” she replied.

“I said you should not have it,” her mother said, sitting on the edge of the chaise longue beside her. “Shall I call for a doctor?”

Lucy shook her head. “I will be fine, it will pass.”

“So... do you think we could persuade you to see Lord Jones more in earnest?” Lady Fitzgerald asked tentatively.

Lucy shook her head. “I do not think he is interested in marriage.”

“Many young men say that, and are stubborn, especially at his age, but are eventually persuaded,” her mother replied.

“I am not sure he could be, he seems very convinced,” Lucy insisted.

“I wish you would make more of an effort,” her mother said with a sigh. “Men do not drop out of trees, you know?”

“I know,” Lucy replied. “It's just that... I want to wait for the right man. Men may not grow on trees, but there is more than enough of them. I want to be a little selective.”

Lady Fitzgerald seemed disappointed even though the smile on her face reached her eyes. “But I fear you are too selective. I fear that you will never marry at all.”

Lucy felt the words stab her heart. Of course her mother was worried about that. But avoiding marriage was the literal purpose of her actions. Her mother would never get the conclusion she desired because, no matter what she did, Lucy would never want for herself what her parents wanted for her.

“I... I am sorry if I cause you any pain,” she said. And she genuinely felt it. Unlike Andrew, who seemed to take some depraved joy in making people squirm, she hated what she needed to do to keep herself unmarried.

“No, I am sorry,” her mother replied. “I try and try to make sense of you, but I feel as though I do not truly understand who you are anymore. And how can I help my own daughter when I do not even know who she is?” A tear rolled down her mother's cheek, leaving behind a trail of white and smoky makeup.

Lucy sat fully upright and embraced her mother tightly. “I... I am not sure who I am, mother. I need time to work that out. And I feel that you and father are pushing me too much.”

“All we want is for you to do well in life. Lucy, your father and I will

not be here forever. You have no siblings, no aunts or uncles. When we are gone you will be alone," her mother explained. "And the world is not a simple place. You will have the house, and some income. But it will not be a nice life. And it may not be easy for you to find a man after that. I had an aunt myself, who was a spinster. She always regretted not listening to my grandparents, and she no longer had anyone who could help her find a husband. She wanted children and could not have any. I... I do not want that for you."

Lucy felt her heart breaking a little. No wonder her mother was so intent on finding her a husband as soon as possible. She, herself, had painful memories of what it would be like to be unwed. She wanted her daughter to have the same security and love that she experienced with Lord Fitzgerald. And Lucy felt some compassion towards her mother, a pull to marry if only to allow her mother to live the rest of her life with a satisfied heart, not a burdened one.

Even knowing all this, Lucy could not find it in her heart to open herself up to marriage. There was just too much wrong with it. But if there was so much wrong with marriage, and so much wrong with being unwed, then what was the solution? Neither alternative sounded good to Lucy.

She did not want to marry a man who did not love her, or to be forever bonded to someone who could turn out to be terrible. But she did not want to end up an old spinster either, always regretting her solitude and her lack of children. What she wanted was the fairytale romance. She wanted a man perfectly suited to her, who would not lie to her, and who would love her and have children with her, and then go on to care for her until the end of their lives.

But that was not real. And so her options were loveless marriage or spinsterhood.

Lucy wished more men were like Lord Andrew Jones. He was a perfect example of what men ought to be like. And yet... he was rare. And even he could not be trusted. After all, he could be deceiving her. The only way to know for certain that a man was not tricking her into marriage was to not marry him. And, after all, loneliness would be better than abuse or neglect...



Her suitor the next day was definitely nothing like Lord Jones. He was, in many ways, nothing like any man she had ever met before, and not in a good sense. Lord Thompson was the very image of a

pompous aristocrat, the sort of person even a Prince would say was too soft and vain. His hands and hair were perfectly manicured, he dressed in more jewels than any woman would dare to wear, and he was too concerned with the state of his suede boots to brave a walk in the garden. So they sat in the front room as Lucy attempted to discourage him.

But that was another way in which he was unlike any man she had ever met: no matter what she said, or how indignant he got, he would simply not back down.

“I... I heard that you were cruel, but I did not believe you were this bad,” he said indignantly. “And with that haircut. I am doing you a favour. Most men would not even see you until you grew it out again.”

“And most women would not see a man who cares more about his shoes than his soul in the first place, and yet here we are,” Lucy replied.

“It is not a crime or a sin to wish to look my very best,” he said indignantly.

Lucy rolled her eyes. “Vanity is most definitely a sin, as is being too proud to admit to your own vanity.”

“Then there is not a woman out there who is sinless,” he insisted.

Lucy shook her head. “We are held to a different standard than men. You, on the other hand, are going out of your way to display yourself like some sort of an overly enthusiastic peacock.”

“And you noticed,” he replied. “And I can see you have nothing bad to say about my sense of dress, so I suppose it is working.”

“I have only not said anything bad yet because I do not even know where to begin,” Lucy replied.

This was exhausting. She had gone through her entire protocol. When she ignored him and replied with single words and sounds, he had simply talked about himself for half an hour straight. When she had tried to lord herself over him he had thought she was flirting by showing off.

Now she was being rude and he was happily bickering with her, getting more and more insulted by the second, and refusing to leave.

“You do know that all of this will not endear you to many men?” Lord Thompson said. “If you wish for a man to marry you, you ought to

show him more of your feminine side."

"I do not wish to marry some petty, snobbish, vain man such as yourself," she replied.

"And I suppose you believe you can do better?" he asked with a slight laugh.

Lucy was caught off guard by this, but quickly bounced back. "Indeed I can. I do not know why my parents keep setting me up with lesser men such as yourself."

She had thought she had done enough to push him away. But this man was particularly resilient. It was a losing battle to try and scare him off. He just laughed and shook his head.

And, however much she needed to pretend it was not affecting her, his insults *were* slowly eroding her self-esteem. She was feeling worse and worse by the minute, and she just wanted him to go away and never return. But even after all that he just smiled and sipped his tea, as though she had just complimented him on his rings.

Thankfully, the clock struck ten and he stood up, arranging his clothes so that everything lay just so. "I am terribly sorry, but I must away. I have a meeting in an hour and I must be prepared. Do not fret, it is not another young lady." He smiled.

"Oh, I would not believe you if you said it was, but one can hope," Lucy replied.

She was glad when he left the room and the servants closed the door. She sank back into her chair with a frustrated groan.

Lucy sighed. Why was he still interested? She had done everything she could to insult him, and yet he came back for more, and more again. Could it be he liked this? Was this something some men liked? Whatever it was, it was annoying.

She felt completely and utterly exhausted. It was not right that she kept having to do this. It was not who she was, who she wanted to be. And yet the more she did it, the more she found it becoming her second nature, the more she questioned her own identity. It was as though the person she was pretending to be was overtaking her, stealing her body and her mind.

Perhaps this was what had happened to Lord Jones? Perhaps after so long pretending to be cold and cruel and to take pleasure in the suffering of others, he had become that way? Lucy shook her head. No, it was probably just who he was. If Duke Perry was two-faced,

then perhaps other men were two-faced as well. She chastised herself for trying to make excuses for Andrew. He did not need or deserve to have her defend him. No man needed or deserved to be defended by her.

Chapter 8

Lucy spent the few hours after her encounter with Lord Thompson recovering from having to talk to Lord Thompson. It felt like she had been drained of all her lust for life and left with only her contempt for humanity and a deep desire to sleep for the rest of the afternoon. She even made her way to her bedroom, where she collapsed on top of the covers and lay, staring at the ceiling, wondering how someone can be so stubborn, and worrying that perhaps there was some truth to his insults.

She was not sure why, even though she had no desire to marry, his accusation that she was not marriageable had hurt her so badly. Nevertheless, it had. Then, it struck her. Marriage was a way of demonstrating love, commitment, and faith. When a man said she was not worthy of marriage, she understood him to be saying she was unworthy of being loved, committed to, or bonded in the eyes of God. It was fine for her to *choose* not to marry. But the suggestion she was not able to hurt her deeply.

Hearing the clock strike one, she got up and made sure her hair was brushed neatly for lunch. It felt odd to only pull the brush a couple of inches before her hair released it. Although she still liked the way her hair looked, she was beginning to feel it was a little alien. As though the face in the mirror were no longer her own.

Stopping her on her way downstairs, her mother asked for her attention before lunchtime. “Lucy, I need to talk to you,” she began.

Lucy was fairly sure it was about Lord Thompson. She followed her mother to some seats in the front room, fully expecting to be told off for insulting him so much.

“Did you like Lord Thompson?” Lady Fitzgerald asked.

Lucy shook her head. “Not at all.” She sighed, feeling a little sick just thinking about him.

“He seemed rather taken with you,” Lady Fitzgerald replied. “Would you prefer Lord Jones?”

Lucy shook her head again. “I am not sure if either of them is right for me,” she replied.

Her mother just looked out the window for almost a minute. Lucy knew better than to get up. Lady Fitzgerald would say when she was done.

“Who do you want to marry, hypothetically speaking?” she finally asked. “Lord Thompson or Lord Jones?”

“I do not want to marry...” She wanted to say 'at all'. But she did not have the courage to do so. She did not have the courage to hurt her mother like that. “... either of them,” she concluded.

“Well what do you want from life?” Lady Fitzgerald asked.

Lucy felt as though the opportunity had been placed right in front of her. Now was the time. Now was her chance. All she needed to do was tell her mother that she was scared of marriage. That she had been hurt by Duke Perry and she was not ready to move on. That, between a bad marriage and spinsterhood, at least a spinster could lead a life of her own. But she could not bring herself to. She knew it would cause her mother so much undue pain.

She fidgeted a little. “To be fair I am not sure what I want. But if I do not know what I want, then how am I supposed to commit to something now?”

Her mother sighed wearily. “Lucy, you cannot put this off forever.”

“Not forever,” she replied, “just until I know what I am doing.”

“Or until you have recovered from the heartache Duke Perry gave you?” Lady Fitzgerald asked.

Did she know? Did she really understand? Lucy felt a surge of excitement, a sense of deep relief accompanying it. Perhaps her mother really could support her through all this. She smiled meekly.

“Lucy... I know Duke Perry was a good man, but we all miss out on great opportunities. You will only miss out on more of them if you continue to pass up suitors due to the flaws you perceive in them. Give them a chance and some may match up to Duke Perry,” her mother continued.

Lucy felt her heart sink. No, her mother did not understand. Not in the slightest. Did she really think it was about comparison? That Lucy was so naïve as to think that her first true love would be her last? No, it was all the opposite. She feared that she would love like that again, be

made a fool of again.

“But mother,” she replied, “I cannot make a decision that will affect my entire life if I am not certain of it.” Her mother did not and could not understand her. At least she could play into her mother's own ideas and use them to her advantage.

“A young woman often has to make decisions which will affect her for years to come. Who and when to marry, how many children to have, whether she wants to adopt... You cannot predict the future, Lucy. You cannot tell what fortune will cast your way. All you can do is make the best choice and persevere with it,” her mother explained.

Oddly, Lucy realised this advice actually did make sense. Even if her mother did not understand her, she had somehow said something relevant to Lucy's own feelings.

She could not predict the future. She could not make a decision and just assume it would work out. And perhaps her decision to avoid marriage at all costs *was* the wrong one. It was a commitment, after all, and much like a commitment to marriage could go wrong, it was possible her commitment not to marry could go wrong in ways she could not even begin to imagine.

Lucy was still not certain. She understood what her mother meant, and it even applied in some ways to her own thoughts, but... it felt more complicated than that. It felt too complicated. If she couldn't truly predict the future, which nobody could, then what was she supposed to do? Just go with the flow and hope that she ended up somewhere nice?

That felt like too little control to her. She sighed. “I shall think about that, mother,” she finally replied.

Lady Fitzgerald seemed more than a little relieved. She wrapped an arm around Lucy's shoulder and hugged her a little. “You think about it, then. You will never regret giving something a little more consideration.”

Lucy nodded.

“Anyway, I have some more good news for you,” her mother said. “A letter has arrived announcing the marriage of Thomas Byrd and Julia Blackmore.”

Lucy was more than a little surprised. “Did that announcement arrive this morning?”

“It did. Isn't it lovely? It is nice to see something like that working for

them, especially when so many people who go to the Mission end up losing their betrothed."

"I feel it is a little rushed, though," she replied.

"Anything would be too rushed in your eyes," Lady Fitzgerald said. "They have been engaged for over a year now."

"But for most of that he was in India," Lucy said. "They barely know one another."

"They have been writing, which is more than enough to get to know someone," Lady Fitzgerald insisted.

Lucy wanted to correct her. She wanted to point out that people tell all sorts of lies in letters, and that even people in India with the Mission could get letters saying one thing, when the complete opposite was happening back home. But she decided to let her mother have this one.

Lady Fitzgerald seemed genuinely thrilled by weddings, more so than by any other sort of major event. She had a strong romantic streak and it always came out for a wedding. At least Lucy knew where her own fairy tale ideals had come from.

As they waited for lunch to be served, Lucy could only think of how odd it was to picture those two marrying. Sure, they were deeply in love. But... it seemed so strange nonetheless. They had not seen one another for a year, and they had been separated a few times before that. Somehow during Thomas's short stays in England they had courted, become engaged, and now were marrying. But in total they had probably only spent a couple of weeks together. Could two people really grow to love one another over a couple of weeks and some letters?

"Are you alright?" Lord Fitzgerald asked. "You seem a little confused.

Lucy shook her head. "She ought not to. He ought not to," she said quietly.

"Ought not to do what?" her father asked her.

Lucy looked up. "Thomas and Julia. They are getting married too soon. I do not even know if they have thought it through properly."

"Lucy, it is their relationship and their marriage. I am sure they and their parents have given it plenty of thought and discussed it at great length," Lady Fitzgerald replied.

"But... What if they are mistaken? What if they are not both ready?"

Lucy asked.

“Do not say such nonsense,” her father replied. “One is ready for marriage as soon as one comes of age, the only question is whether the person is suitable.”

Lucy sighed. “I suppose so. I just... I would like to make sure my friends are doing well.”

“I understand. It is a bit of a shock to you. Perhaps talking to them would help. Shall we visit the Byrds later today?”

Lucy nodded.



Following lunch, Lucy went to the Byrds' home, hoping someone would be in. She did not have much time between the end of lunch and four, when she would need to be home in time to get ready for tea at Lord Jones's house. But she needed to talk to someone and put her mind at ease.

Both Antoinette and Thomas were apparently still staying with their parents for a couple of days. Duke Perry was back in Devonshire on important business and Julia was home with her parents. It would be the perfect opportunity.

Sitting down on the sofa with Antoinette, waiting for Thomas to come and see them, Lucy voiced her concerns. As she spoke Antoinette held little Beatrice Perry, seven months old, on her knee.

Antoinette shook her head. “Lucy, I understand that you had a very bad experience, but you cannot base your every life decision on something one person did to you.”

“I just feel that it is not right, that people can be deceptive...” Lucy said, shaking her head.

“Then who do you think is deceiving whom?” Antoinette asked with a chuckle. “I thought you liked and trusted both my brother and Julia.”

Lucy paused. “But it's not just that sort of deception. What if they are different to how they believe each other to be?” Lucy was half distracted by the baby, feeling a pang of regret that she would never have one of her own. But it was a price she needed to pay.

“I beg your pardon?” Antoinette asked, confused.

“We all put on an impression for other people, so what if they want to

marry the impression, and then when the real person is revealed they are trapped in a loveless marriage?" Lucy explained.

"Lucy, you are just focusing on one person again. Do not ruin your life, or anyone else's, on one person," Antoinette repeated.

"People ruin their lives over one person in marriage, though," Lucy replied.

Antoinette shook her head in frustration. "It is different. It is... like eating cake. You may take a bite of many different cakes. Some may taste nice, some may taste terrible, some may even make you sick. But eventually you will taste a cake that is absolutely delicious. Would you not order yourself a slice?"

Lucy shrugged. "I suppose. But what if that cake is spoiled inside?"

"That is a risk you take when eating it," Antoinette replied.

"I do not understand why you would even wish to, though," Lucy said. "Why not just eat something else?"

"And that is fine if that is what you wish to do. Foolish, but fine. However it is not your place to tell others what cake they want to eat," Antoinette said.

"Precisely," said Thomas from the doorway.

Lucy looked up. "Oh, how long have you been there?" she asked. "I am so sorry if you heard me say anything insulting. I did not mean to insult you, I just—"

Thomas shook his head. "I am not insulted, Lucy, I am just confused that someone as old as you are could be so naïve. Do you really believe people get married so quickly as to not find out the things that matter about the other person?"

"Sometimes they do," Lucy countered.

"But generally they do not. And do you think that in the years we have known one another, Julia and I have not learned the important aspects of each other's character?" Thomas asked.

Lucy shook her head. "I am sorry for doubting. I suppose I should not assume so readily."

Thomas nodded. "You are correct, but I forgive you. But Antoinette is also correct. You cannot let that one experience dictate your entire life."

Lucy sighed. Why was it that nobody was willing to listen to her? Were she and Andrew the only voices of reason in the whole of England? Or were they both being as ridiculous as everyone said they were?

“You look like you could do with a break from your day to day life. There are actually some new people in town,” Antoinette said suddenly. “We shall be seeing them tomorrow, if you would like to come.”

“New people?” Lucy asked. “Are they staying or…?”

“Just passing through, though they may buy a holiday cottage. You may find this fun: they are a real Prince and Princess. A brother and a sister,” Antoinette explained. “And we have been invited to see them, seeing as I am a Duchess.”

“A Princess?” Lucy asked. Her only impression of princes and princesses came from fairy tales. “A real Princess?”

“A European Princess, so perhaps not quite as glamorous as an English Princess, but royalty nonetheless,” Antoinette explained.

Lucy was still in slight awe. Her fascination with fairy tales had been repressed ever since she found out about Duke Perry’s betrayal. But now, with the possibility of meeting a Prince and a Princess being very real, she felt her illusions flooding back to her.

Visions of dancing with the Prince took over her mind. Perhaps a fairytale was not completely out of the question after all?

Chapter 9

Lucy had to keep chastising herself for her childish excitement. A princess was not anything completely extraordinary, after all. Plenty of people were princesses, especially in Europe, where one was a princess if they were a king's cousin, niece, or great-granddaughter. Under such a loose definition, even Antoinette might be considered a princess by European standards.

And yet there was still something thrilling about the idea of a princess being in their midst, about that world being something that existed outside of books and songs...

She could not help but wonder whether nearly everyone else actually did live in some fairytale world, and she was simply one of the unfortunate ones who had to suffer to give everyone else their Happily Ever After.

It felt as though everywhere she looked there were people living the sort of life described in her books. They believed in marriage and love and happy endings. They followed their dreams and married their perfect partners. Of course not *everyone* had such great luck. But it seemed as though only a few were unlucky enough to suffer the fate she feared. And every time her scepticism mounted, something fantastical would happen to taunt her, to tease her with the possibility of an ideal, fairytale ending.

Princes and princesses, what next? Giants? Toads and frogs that turn into handsome young men? Witches?

She rolled her eyes. Lucy had thought that modern society had moved beyond such magical thinking, such superstition. And yet when it came to high society, everyone still seemed to think there was an aura of magic around it. That royalty was more than just people, that marrying up would spontaneously fix your problems, that a title was all one needed in life.

Lucy could not picture life a class below her own, of course. But nevertheless she could still look up a class and realize they still had

problems, just like she did. Nothing was fixed just because you got married, or had a bit more money. The quest for happiness was a wild goose chase.

Antoinette had invited her to tea with the Princess, but Lucy had weighed her options and decided her mother would probably rather she spent the time with Lord Jones. Or not. She wasn't sure anymore. It would probably be wiser not to tell Lady Fitzgerald about the situation.

Instead, she made her way home just in time to get changed for tea with Andrew, and set off with her parents. Lord Jones's house was quite splendid. It did not have the woman's touch which Lucy's home, or Antoinette's home did. But, unlike Lady Fitzgerald, who could not stop remarking on the lack of finery, Lucy thought that the more masculine, simple look of the home was rather charming. She would have been more concerned if a bachelor like him spent all afternoon arranging roses like her mother did.

Although she did not want to let it show externally, for fear her parents got the wrong impression, Lucy was oddly excited to be spending some more time with Andrew. He always had a refreshing outlook on things, always had something interesting to say, was always prepared to speak his mind when others bit their tongues.

“Have you heard of the arrival of the Prince and Princess?” Lady Fitzgerald asked. “Dutch, I think they are, or German, or something of the sort.”

Lord Fitzgerald nodded. “Indeed, German, I do believe. And both single too, apparently. I have heard that people from all across the country are coming to visit them, even to catch a glimpse of them.

“Yes, I have heard,” he said quietly. “A lot of bother about nothing, if you ask me.”

Lady Fitzgerald appeared personally insulted by Lord Jones's remark. She wrinkled her nose. “Well, it is not every day that one has the chance to meet a princess.”

Andrew shrugged. “I suppose that someone's title does not matter that much to me. They are just people—there are thousands like them on the planet. Nothing special.”

“Well, I suppose if you were invited to see them you would think differently,” Lady Fitzgerald replied.

“Oh, I have been,” Andrew said, “but I decided I would rather stick to

my commitment and have tea with my friends."

Lucy could tell that her mother was torn between feeling flattered and feeling confused and insulted. On the one hand, Lord Jones was saying he had chosen them over literal royalty. On the other hand, he was saying he completely eschewed the social mores of their class. Lady Fitzgerald just smiled politely and sipped her tea.

Lucy then knew she could not let her mother find out about the invitation. Lady Fitzgerald would not say anything to Lord Jones, either out of politeness, or because she believed he was the only man she could persuade Lucy to marry. But if she found out that Lucy herself had also rejected the opportunity to mingle with royalty just to have tea with Lord Jones.

After a few cakes and sandwiches, Lucy and Andrew withdrew to a settee at the corner of the room with their cups of tea, within view, but out of earshot of her parents.

"Are you just saying all this to sound controversial and rebellious?" she asked tentatively.

"All what?" Andrew asked, sipping his tea.

Lucy shrugged. "About how princes and princesses are just normal people," she said.

"I do genuinely believe it," Andrew insisted, "although I do also find it highly entertaining to see your parents fretting about what I do and do not do with my time."

"And you really rejected an invitation to see them... so you could have tea with me?" she asked, blushing a little despite her best efforts.

He nodded. "Of course. I know you. I know you are good conversation, and pleasant company. I do not know them. How could I choose a stranger over a friend?" As he said this he gently rested his hand on hers.

"But that stranger is an unmarried princess," Lucy insisted, removing her hand away from his. "Do you not hope that perhaps she could look beyond her status and marry you? Is that not every man's dream, to have a perfect wife and be supported by her family?"

Andrew chuckled. "Who could ever think another human to be perfect?" he contested. "No, no, the money I would get from her parents would be a fee, a salary to reward me for enduring her, princess or not. And I am not sure even a princess has enough money and is pleasant enough to make marriage worth my efforts."

Lucy sighed and nodded. “I completely understand,” she replied. But her heart sank a little at the thought that Andrew, one of the few men who would make marriage worthwhile, was committed to never marrying.

Lucy was committed to never marrying as well, of course. But if there were a man worth marrying, he would be Lord Jones. And so many young women were choosing to marry, or forced to marry, and wound up with the sort of gullible young man who would make their lives miserable. Then again, these women were just as gullible, surely? Only a gullible fool would allow themselves to marry in the first place.

Or maybe that was the trick? Maybe gullible people married gullible people? And, in that case... surely cynics would marry cynics? She locked eyes with Lord Jones. He smiled softly. She blushed.

No. No, this was not an option. She looked away.

Fortunately, before anything else could be said or take place, her parents saved her. “Lucy, we must get going. We have to be in town for seven, and home by eight in time to get changed for dinner,” her mother explained.

“By eight? Will dinner be early tonight?” Lucy asked, standing up and straightening her skirts.

“Oh, we are going to see the Princess this dinner time,” her mother said in the sort of nonchalant way which suggested she was decidedly exploding with excitement on the inside.

Lucy followed her mother's gaze to Lord Jones's face. Clearly Lady Fitzgerald expected him to be jealous, or to make some bitter or angry remark. He just nodded. “I hope you have a fantastic time.”

Lady Fitzgerald sulked the entire rest of the way into town. She had apparently wanted to either invite Lord Jones, or to confront him for being jealous. When he was neither interested in going, nor bitter, she was not sure how to react.

“I simply... I cannot fathom why he would be so careless about royalty,” Lady Fitzgerald said.

Lucy nodded. “Antoinette says that European royalty is sometimes more like being an Earl, or a Duke, though,” she remarked.

“Even so, higher standing than a Baron. I mean... what would anyone think if they were to hear that?” Lady Fitzgerald sighed.

“I suppose he only does it to make people angry,” Lucy remarked.

“A juvenile attitude,” Lady Fitzgerald insisted. “I am not sure we ought to consider him a prospect after all. He has much learning to do before he is ready to marry. Now, you on the other hand are as ready as a young lady ever is. And we shall be meeting a prince, so you will need you to look your best. A haircut is in order, and new shoes.”

She shuddered. This sounded dreadful. Her mother, trying to set her up with a prince? “I am not sure a prince would consider a girl like me,” Lucy said, trying to escape from this preposterous idea.

“Oh, no, as you said, in rank they are more like a Duke. And if Dukes marry the daughters of Barons all the time, you should have no problem with this prince,” her mother tried to reassure her.

“But he is from another country, we would have nothing in common,” Lucy insisted.

“High-class taste is all a man and a woman need to have in common before marriage, you will be fine,” her mother countered.

Lucy shook her head. “And what if Andrew is right? What if they are pompous because of their status?”

“My sweet child,” Lord Fitzgerald insisted, “do not listen to what that man has to say, he is simply jealous of royalty.”

Lucy sighed and followed her mother into the hairdresser. She had only recently had a trim, and was not quite sure what her mother intended her to do. Lady Fitzgerald was leafing through some beautiful sketches of various short hairdos.

“Say, do you know if any of these are currently popular in Europe?” she asked the hairdresser. “Germany, perhaps? I think a worldlier style would suit Lucy...”

“I don't suppose it has anything to do with you wishing for me to marry a foreign prince?” Lucy asked, with a raised eyebrow.

Lady Fitzgerald blushed a deep red. “Now, Lucy, don't be stubborn. We need you to look your very best when you meet them. You are a young, pretty, very eligible young woman, and if you look the part you may be considered.” She paused. “Or at least they may introduce you to some other royals, which would get you a step closer to becoming royalty yourself.”

Lucy sighed in frustration. “I seriously do not believe a prince would marry someone such as myself, that is all.”

Her mother sat down beside her and waved the hairdresser away.

“Lucy, you need to understand this now, but you will marry. No matter what you do or say, you have to. And your father and I will ensure this happens no matter what.”

Lucy shook her head. “And I will,” she lied. “But I do not want to marry too suddenly, in case it is someone deceiving me.”

“And if you are concerned that a man may be deceiving you for our money, what better way of preventing this than by marrying a prince, a man with far more money than we could ever dream of?” her mother insisted.

“But then what reason does he have to marry me?” she asked.

“Men do not only marry for wealth and power. They marry for love, for beauty, for children. You are young, and beautiful, and if only you made a little effort you would be charming again. Even a prince would be glad to marry you,” Lady Fitzgerald explained.

Lucy pursed her lips. “But I am sure there are plenty of pretty, educated, charming, young women who are also princesses, or of similar status. Why would he choose someone like me over someone... more like himself?”

“Nonsense, I am sure you have as good a chance as anyone else,” her mother insisted.

Lucy wanted to keep pressing. But what could she do or say to put her mother off? Nothing she could think of would be enough without being too far. The thought struck her that perhaps that was just how committed her parents were to this idea. They would stop at nothing to marry her, and if she actually stood between them and their chosen husband for her, they would think she was insane.

She watched as the hairdresser began to delicately trim her hair, careful not to shorten it too much more than it already was, preparing it in one of the styles her mother had chosen. Lucy herself had not even seen the style, the cutting had just begun suddenly. Glancing at the book, Lucy winced. None of them looked much good. She preferred the rough, masculine cut she was wearing. But her mother would hear none of it.

They thought they knew best. They thought they understood her wants and needs. They thought they could help her and make her life better, if only she obeyed them to the letter. If she only accepted their choice of men, of clothes, of friends, of parties, of haircuts, then she would be happy and fulfilled. They would never understand her.

It was not a simple phase. It was not a fancy. She was genuinely going to avoid getting married, at any cost. But she had to continue to play along. Because, in their eyes, rejecting marriage was infantile, if not insane. She just needed to carry on as they wanted her to, but manage to avoid marriage, until she was not at any risk.

And yet she now saw that if she carried on fighting their wishes, they would just push further and further into the absurd. From boys of her age and status, to older men, and now they were pursuing a prince. Like men were some flavour of sweet that if she just tried the right one she would be seduced forever and be content to commit herself to one.

There would be no getting through to them, of course, but this stood to be her most humiliating public appearance to date.

Chapter 10

Naturally, it turned out that the dinner with the Princess was the one Antoinette had referred to. It would be a little awkward to be seen there after rejecting the original offer, but the awkwardness was much improved by the feeling of comfort she had as she saw her dear friend. At least a familiar face would make the whole ordeal more bearable, whatever her mother did.

Fortunately for Lucy, the Prince was not there. Unfortunately for her, she still had a haircut reminiscent of a choir boy's. In whatever company, that haircut was atrocious, and she was looking for any excuse to ruffle it back into something a bit more rugged. Hopefully without insulting her mother's tastes too much.

Even though it was her holiday home, it seemed that the Princess would not simply greet her guests and spend time relaxing with them before dinner. Instead, she would apparently make an entrance when the meal was served, and no sooner. This left Lucy with the distinct impression that being a princess was never *too* casual wherever in the world you happened to come from. But she was enjoying being able to spend some time relaxing with her friend before dinner.

“I look like a little boy,” Lucy remarked, as she and Antoinette touched up their makeup before the Princess arrived and the meal began.

“It is not so bad,” Antoinette insisted, but from her tone of voice Lucy could tell she was not sure of it either.

“No, be honest, it looks awful, doesn't it?” Lucy said, turning and making eye contact with Antoinette.

Having nowhere to hide, her friend shrugged and smiled. “It is unusual. I am not sure what to make of it.”

Lucy groaned. “Is it better or worse than before?”

Antoinette shrugged again. “Worse, I suppose... but I am still not used to how you look with short hair either way,” she added hastily.

Lucy nodded. “My mother insisted on a European cut. I doubt any lady wears her hair like this anywhere, let alone somewhere as fashionable as Europe.”

“They'll call anything European if they think it will help it sell. Some German things and some French things are very in fashion right now,” Antoinette replied.

“I just don't understand any of this,” Lucy said with a slight sigh.

“You're still adapting from boarding school,” Antoinette said softly, “just give it time and you will know everything about what you ought to do, where you need to be seen, how you should dress...”

Lucy looked into the mirror. She wasn't sure she wanted to know about all that. She barely recognized the woman in the reflection as herself. It seemed like only a few days ago she was still a little girl in school, and now she was dressed to show off her womanly figure, decked in heavy jewels, and sporting a ridiculous haircut. She ruffled her hair up a little, looking in the mirror to try and get some toughness back into it. She didn't want to look like a woman. She didn't want to be a woman. She wasn't really ready to stop being a girl just yet.

As she sat down at the table, she noticed that the Prince was not the only person who would not be attending. Duke Perry was also missing in action, as were Thomas and Julia. The dinner would only be herself, her parents, Antoinette, and the Princess. She could already see the frustration on her mother's face. But this little setback would not make her parents give up. She could also see the determination etched into her father's wrinkles. He was going to make the most of this opportunity and try and elevate Lucy in the world, whatever the cost.

The arrival of the Princess was announced, and Lucy turned to Antoinette for a hint on how to act. Antoinette stood, and so Lucy copied her. Antoinette understood these things properly. Lord and Lady Fitzgerald were prone to overacting and Lucy was concerned she would seem pretentious, or to be grovelling, if she followed their lead.

As the Princess walked in, she smiled and Lucy copied Antoinette's curtsy. Lucy could already tell that the Princess's smiling face was another social mask, designed to somehow manipulate and control people. But she wasn't sure how.

Princess Elisaveta of Germany was an enormous woman, easily over six foot four, yet very slender and graceful, like some sort of a magical creature or a fantastical being. Her hair was so long and abundant that

even collected into loops about her head, it was obvious how much of it she had. This, combined with her gracefulness and beauty, made Lucy more than a little jealous. Not to mention suspicious. After all, as Lord Jones had said, nobody was perfect. Yet this woman seemed to be the very picture of a perfect fairytale princess. It could not be right. It had to all be constructed, somehow...

However over dinner, Lucy softened a little. She was forced to conclude that Her Majesty Elisaveta was not such a terrible person after all. She always seemed to have a serene expression on her face, but besides that she was as pleasant as could be. She listened intently, asked you relevant questions, and offered support, empathy, and advice as needed.

Lucy had wanted to hate her. She had wanted to hate her for everything she represented. And she could not. Because the Princess was not a person you could hate. She was the sort of person that made it feel like a genuine privilege to be allowed to dine with her. So much so, that rather than strive to get home as soon as possible after dinner ended, Lucy almost leaped at the opportunity to walk with the Princess in the gardens, to aid digestion.

Although night had fallen and the gardens ought to be dark, Lucy was surprised to find the path was strategically illuminated by carefully positioned oil lamps, not dissimilar to the ones used on the main streets. She marvelled not only that someone had the wealth to sustain such an extravagant habit of walking in the garden at night, but also that someone had possessed the intellect to devise a way of making it easy and pleasant.

“It is lovely out here,” Lucy remarked. “Our gardens are pretty, but Your Highness's are something marvellous.”

The Princess smiled sweetly. “Thank you. Although all credit naturally does go to the housekeeper and gardener. We are barely here, but they keep up appearance, according to the expectations.”

Lucy nodded. “I understand what that is like...”

“I like your hair,” Princess Elisaveta said with earnestness, as though completely and instantly understanding Lucy's remark.

“You are just saying so because you ought to. Because you were raised to be polite and kind to those less fortunate,” Lucy replied. Catching herself too late, she stumbled over an apology. “I am sorry, Your Highness, I do not know why I said that, I...” she trailed off, unsure what to say next.

“It is perfectly alright to feel cynical,” the Princess said after waiting for Lucy to finish. “All of us have our doubts. And the haircut is not your first choice. But I do like it. It would be nicer longer, if you don't mind me saying so, but you have very nice hair nonetheless.”

Lucy paused. There was something familiar about all this. “How does Your Highness always know the right thing to say?” she asked.

Princess Elisaveta nodded. “I have been taught from a young age how to say things properly. I speak my mind, like any other person, but I do so carefully, to make sure nobody is hurt by my words.”

“I wish I could do that, Your Highness,” Lucy replied. “I always seem to end up saying what other people want me to say, and usually not saying it in the right way at all.”

“Did you go to boarding school?” Princess Elisaveta suddenly asked.

Lucy was a little taken aback. “Well, yes, Your Highness, I did. How did Your Highness know?”

“I have also been to boarding schools of a sort. It is a matter of course for many members of the royal family in Germany to spend an amount of time in finishing schools. They are wonderful places for teaching you manners, and how to socialize, but they also often teach you to obey, rather than to act for your own needs,” Princess Elisaveta explained.

Lucy’s heart leap into her throat. It was not often that she met anyone she could sympathize with. “Then Your Highness understands,” she said.

The Princess nodded. “It takes some time in the wider world to get an improved perspective, to determine who one is, and what one's identity and personality ought to be. This does not mean you need to rebel, or that you need to be excessively pleasant. Rather, that you need to work out who you are in your heart, and develop that person. Because she did not develop at school.”

Lucy was going to reply when she heard some footsteps at the top of the garden. She knew exactly who it would be and a shiver of dread ran down her spine. She was enjoying opening up to this new friend, and now her mother was there to ruin it.

“Ah, there you are, Lucy, I have been looking everywhere for you,” her mother said. Her eyes were almost immediately drawn to the Princess, ruining any pretence that it was Lucy who Lady Fitzgerald was truly concerned about. “Your Highness,” she said with a deep

curtsy. “May I say it is an absolute honour to be invited to dinner with you.”

Princess Elisaveta nodded. “I am glad you were able to make it. My friend Duke Perry has said many kind things about your family.”

“Oh, His Grace is such a flatterer. We really are nobodies, Your Highness,” Lady Fitzgerald said, blushing.

Lucy was not quite so capable of taking this all in her stride. All she felt was pure, unadulterated shame. She wanted to curl up into a tiny ball and keep curling up tighter and tighter until she vanished. She glanced up at Princess Elisaveta, who seemed to look back down at her with an understanding and reassuring gaze. Her brown eyes were warm and comforting.

“A lovely evening for a garden walk, is it not, Your Highness?” Lady Fitzgerald continued.

“Yes, it is a wonderful evening. I have heard that England is quite cold, but it is not so bad,” Princess Elisaveta said with a polite smile.

Lady Fitzgerald smiled, looking a little pleased, as though she had managed to make the weather nice all of her own accord. “Yes, we are in the height of summer, so it can get much colder, but tonight is pleasant, Your Highness.”

“That said,” Princess Elisaveta added, “I do believe I have forgotten my shawl. It may be warmer than I anticipated, but one still ought to cover one's shoulders in this breeze.”

Lady Fitzgerald nodded in earnest agreement. “I shall see if I can find a servant to bring Your Highness one.”

“Thank you very much. Please ask for the blue one,” Princess Elisaveta said.

“I shall, Your Highness,” Lady Fitzgerald said with a curtsy. She was obviously making an effort not to run all the way back into the house, she was so eager to help.

Normally Lucy would find that endearing in her mother. No matter the reason, she was always ready to help. Whether it was to ensure her daughter enjoyed improved marriage prospects, or to please a friend, Lady Fitzgerald was always so quick to try and please everyone. But today was a little different. As with Lord Jones, Lucy found Princess Elisaveta to be a wonderful, admirable woman. And her mother's display was neither wonderful nor admirable. It was embarrassing. Lucy was not prepared to handle this sort of situation.

All she wanted was to be left in peace.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Lucy said once her mother had vanished inside. “I must admit I was mortified.”

Princess Elisaveta shook her head softly. “Why?”

“Because my mother is simply trying to get close to Your Highness to improve my marriage prospects,” Lucy confessed.

“Ah, I see. I suppose that your mother did wish to meet my brother?” she asked with a knowing smile.

Lucy nodded. “She does, Your Highness. Him or another of Your Highnesses' royal friends. She has got a bit ahead of herself.”

Princess Elisaveta did not seem angry, though Lucy could detect more than a little hurt in her eyes. “Everyone wishes to spend more time with royalty, I suppose,” she mused.

“For what it is worth, I like Your Highness for who Your Highness is,” Lucy replied.

“It is very difficult to tell, I am afraid, when someone says something like that in earnest,” Princess Elisaveta said, sounding a little downtrodden. Even when in pain, she was graceful, calm, and collected.

“I suppose I could tell Your Highness something which would reassure Your Highness,” Lucy said.

Princess Elisaveta made eye contact with her. “Do go on.”

“Your Highness may consider it very rude,” Lucy said, blushing.

“Please,” Princess Elisaveta said, smiling a little.

“When I was about to meet Your Highness, I had a certain impression of royalty. I believed Your Highness's class was the thing of fairy tales,” Lucy confessed. “So I thought Your Highness would fall short of my expectations, and be an egoistic, overrated woman who believed herself better than others whilst possessing objectively worse traits, all because she wears a crown.”

Princess Elisaveta was completely silent. For a moment, Lucy was afraid she had deeply insulted her new friend. She wondered what happened when you insulted a princess. Were you sent to prison? Executed? Or just socially ostracised forever?

But then she saw Princess Elisaveta's shoulders shake slightly, and her

lips pressed firmly together as she repressed a laugh. Her face was red and a tear escaped her eye. She drew a deep breath to steady herself. “I beg your pardon, Miss Fitzgerald, but your honesty is both refreshing and amusing.”

“I am sorry if I insulted Your Highness at all,” Lucy said, looking at some little white flowers in the hedge so as to avoid making eye contact.

“Not at all,” Princess Elisaveta replied. “No, we are used to people having such an impression of us. The way people of different classes see one another is... complex, is it not? But usually these are matters discussed behind closed doors, not to the individual's face.”

“I suppose I do not care that much what people think of me anymore, Your Highness,” Lucy admitted.

“That is not a bad thing to feel,” Princess Elisaveta said. “How would you like to return tomorrow for lunch?”

Chapter 11

The trip home from Princess Elisaveta's summer home was pretty straightforward for Lucy. Everyone was tired from an evening of eating and socializing, and her mother was too busy raving about the luxury of the Princess's house to cause Lucy much trouble.

“It was beautiful, like something out of a painting,” Lady Fitzgerald said with a soft sigh. “I would love to live somewhere like that.”

“Our house isn't much different,” Lord Fitzgerald replied, sounding a little indignant.

“But the details are what truly make it,” Lady Fitzgerald insisted. “I am sure our Lucy would be glad to live in a house so wonderfully kept.”

But by the time she said this, they were home. Lucy yawned loudly. “I suppose I ought to get to bed. I need my rest,” she said with a smile as she dismounted from the coach and quickly began to make her way upstairs before her mother could continue talking about this Prince she ought to marry.

She was in bed and asleep within minutes of getting home.

❧

It was the next morning that presented a challenge. She could not avoid her mother forever, especially not at breakfast. She had been hoping that Lady Fitzgerald would have forgotten the matter, or at least set it aside until they knew more about the situation. No such luck.

“I see you and the Princess got along very well,” said Lady Fitzgerald with a twinkle in her eye.

Lucy nodded and smiled. “Yes, it turns out we have much in common. We're a similar age, and we both have been to boarding schools.”

“That is nice, it is wonderful to see that the class barrier is not quite so

great as you seemed to think it was," her mother continued.

"But it is nevertheless present," Lucy replied, "and I do not mean to say that it was not difficult to talk to her. Merely that she was not as hard to relate to as I had originally assumed."

"But do you not think that perhaps it would not be so difficult to get truly close to her if you needed to?" Lady Fitzgerald insisted.

"It is not about *needing* to, it is about wanting to. And I do want to get to know her, but not for the reasons you intend to." She knew exactly what her mother wanted, and she would not play along with it.

Lady Fitzgerald shook her head. "But it is important to consider your future. Your prospects. I will not be here forever to guide you. And marrying a prince would be—"

"I do not intend to marry a prince," Lucy interrupted. "Any prince who would take a lowly lady such as myself is not a prince one ought to be marrying. And besides, I do not intend on using Her Highness Elisaveta. She is my friend, not a step on a ladder."

"Lucy, you must use these connections to their full potential," her mother said, her voice heavy with frustration. "As I have said, you have as good a chance as any other. And as I have also said, I will not be here forever, so you must make the most of my help whilst you can."

"But I do not even know this prince, mother," Lucy protested.

"And yet you judge him so harshly. Just as you judged Her Highness Elisaveta. And you turned out to like her, did you not?"

Lucy nodded. "I suppose I did judge her quickly. But is it not also fast judgement to decide one ought to marry a man based on his title alone?"

"I believe that optimistic judgement opens up opportunities, whereas pessimistic judgement closes doors," her mother replied.

Lucy tried to think of an appropriate reply, but nothing came to mind. Her only true reason was that she didn't want to do it. But what choice did she have? This was just the game people played. "I just... I would not want to use Her Highness Elisaveta. This is the first time in a long time that I have had a lady friend who I held so much in common with. I would hate to abuse her trust."

"And you will not!" Lady Fitzgerald replied. "You will simply make use of your friendship to get closer to her brother. You need not lie to

her or control her. Simply see the Prince and befriend him. You can continue to be a good and honest friend to Her Highness at the same time."

Lucy looked at her almost cold cup of tea. "I suppose I could see if we are invited to their holiday home again any time soon," she reluctantly conceded.

"That is the spirit," Lady Fitzgerald replied. "How would we go about seeing Her Highness again, then?"

Lucy paused. "I am not sure. I am not sure what the correct protocol is when one is not too close to a princess."

Lady Fitzgerald rubbed her temples. "Do you know anyone who may be aware of the correct way of attempting to meet with a princess?"

"I suppose... Antoinette may know. After all, she says a European princess is very similar to a Duchess, so I suppose she ought to have some idea. Or perhaps she will even be close enough to invite us herself," Lucy mused.

"That sounds most wonderful. We shall see Duchess Antoinette immediately after breakfast," Lady Fitzgerald insisted.

Lucy felt a little more relaxed. Antoinette would be able to help her. Antoinette often had answers. And not just for matters such as "how to meet a princess," but also for matters such as "how to prevent my mother from getting me to marry a prince." Not that she felt too concerned that this would actually happen. She was confident that a prince would never take her. But she needed to stop her mother before their name was any further humiliated.

Antoinette was staying with her parents for a couple of days, along with little Alexander. Duke Perry was fortunately still absent. Antoinette's parents were busy spending a day fawning over their granddaughter. Lady Fitzgerald, herself a little broody, joined them, giving Lucy and Antoinette plenty of time to talk in private.

Lucy was not sure what to do in her circumstances. But Antoinette would be able to help.

"Your mother wants you to see Her Highness Elisaveta again, apparently," Antoinette said.

Lucy nodded, then shook her head. "Well... yes, she does, and..."

"Do you not wish to see her?" Antoinette asked.

"It is not that at all!" Lucy insisted. "It is only... my mother wants me

to get close to the princess so I can meet the prince."

"For marriage purposes?" Antoinette asked.

Lucy nodded. "It seems as though every time I make a new friend, my mother has to try and make it into a courtship opportunity. All I wanted was to befriend Lord Jones and Her Highness, and now they are considered some sort of a path into marriage."

"It is natural," Antoinette said. "She just wants to protect you."

"From what?" Lucy said, exasperated. "Currently she is making me a social disaster, a laughing stock. I am going to need protecting from her if she gets any worse." She sank back into her chair and stared at the ceiling.

"I did not mean it in that sense. A lot of parents see their daughters as precious, as needing someone to watch over them. She wants you to marry a good man, so she can know that you will always have someone to watch over you, even after she is gone," Antoinette explained.

"Antoinette... what if I did not wish to get married?" Lucy asked quietly. "At all. Ever."

"You have said as much to me before," Antoinette replied.

"But in earnest. Even if I were to meet the most perfect man, I would be afraid of marrying him." Lucy stood up and walked to the window.

"I suppose I would be confused. After all, the most perfect man ought to be one worth marrying," Antoinette said.

"But that is just it. Nobody is perfect. So even if I met someone who *appeared* perfect, I could not marry him. Especially if I met someone so perfect, actually, for it would be sure to be a lie."

"Are you serious, then?" Antoinette asked. "You intend to miss out on all that marriage has to offer? On the safety, the love, the children?"

"If I must," Lucy replied. "No deal is better than a bad deal, after all."

Antoinette shook her head. "I simply find it hard to believe anyone would choose such a path. Especially someone who used to believe so wholeheartedly in marriage as you did."

Lucy pursed her lips a little. "I was young then. And naïve. I am older now and I understand that the things I wanted are not real."

"But some of them are, just not in the way you want them to be. Give

it time," Antoinette said.

"Everyone seems to assume I shall change my mind, but I personally doubt that I will," Lucy explained. "I have given this some thought, and I need to stay away from men."

"Even men like Lord Andrew Jones? You seemed quite partial to him. Perhaps a man like him would suit you well," Antoinette replied.

Lucy thought this over. "No, because there is no way of being truly certain who you are marrying."

"Then you ought to marry another cynic. Someone else who thinks like you do. Then you can both be straightforward and honest and have low expectations together," Antoinette giggled a little.

"I had considered that," Lucy replied, "but then I realised that if a man were to discover I intend to marry only another cynic, then he could pretend to be a cynic so as to marry me."

"So you are not willing to consider a man like Lord Andrew Jones, because if you did he might start pretending to be a cynic, which you know he already is, to trick you into marrying, which neither of you want? Do you realize how ridiculous you sound?" Antoinette insisted.

Lucy scowled. "It is not ridiculous to be careful. What if Lord Jones will not marry me, but tells others that I would marry a cynic? And then someone comes to me pretending to be a cynic, marries me, and I live the rest of my life in misery?"

"You are overthinking," Antoinette said with a slight chuckle.

Lucy sighed. "Perhaps so, but what else can I do? I do not want a life full of misfortune if I can avoid it. I want to marry for love, not be deceived."

"You cannot truly plan for love, it just happens. And you cannot plan to avoid misfortune. Misfortune of all kinds of people, for all kinds of reasons. There are many misfortunes worse than an unhappy marriage," Antoinette said.

"So are you saying I ought to marry this prince?" Lucy replied, walking back over to her seat.

Antoinette shook her head. "No. I am saying you ought to give him a chance."

Lucy was about to sit down and reply when she heard a slight knock at the door. "I hope you are both well." Like startled deer, the two women turned their heads suddenly upon the intruder.

It was Duke Perry. Lucy could feel her blood boiling just by laying eyes on him. It was some cruel twist of fate that her betrayer was married to her best friend. It was his fault she felt like this in the first place. It was his fault she could not believe in marriage. It was his fault she was suspicious of men.

“I hope you do not mind my presence,” Duke Perry said meekly.

Lucy stepped away from the chair, showing she was not going to sit back down. “I do,” she said bluntly.

“Come now, Lucy, don't be that way. We can have tea,” Antoinette replied.

“No, never mind,” Lucy said, “I shall be leaving shortly.” She glared at Duke Perry, who still seemed oddly sheepish.

“That's a shame,” Duke Perry replied. “I was coming in because you seemed friends with Lord Jones, who shall be visiting us soon for mid-morning tea and sandwiches.”

“Lord Andrew Jones?” Lucy asked, trying not to sound overly interested.

“You do not have to stay,” Duke Perry insisted. If any other man said that, Lucy would have assumed it was some crude manipulative tactic, a hint of sarcasm. But Duke Perry said it in all earnestness, as though she actually did wish to leave despite Andrew's impending arrival.

Lucy was torn. On the one hand it would be nice to wait and see Andrew, especially on her own terms again. Her mother would no doubt turn down mid-morning tea, as she was keeping her figure and playing with the baby. This would give Lucy plenty of time to talk with her friends.

But on the other hand, that would mean enduring Duke Perry's presence. And this was something she had experienced great difficulty with for the past two years. Ever since finding out about his deceit, she had done her best to avoid him. Had it been an option, she would never have seen him ever again. But she could not stay away from her friend. At first, she had only entertained Antoinette at her own home. Then she had stopped by for brief visits and left long before Duke Perry could even lay eyes on her. Then she had endured his presence at parties and balls. And bit by bit Duke Perry had crept back into the shadows of her life.

She could not understand how come he was so sheepish and shy after all he had done to her. If anything, being bold and brazen about his

actions would be more forgivable. She may have been able to tolerate his presence if he bragged about how he nearly deceived her, how he could have wholly deceived her if he had not become a Duke. She could tolerate him if he were a dislikeable, obnoxious man.

As it stood he was just a wolf in sheep's clothing. He seemed so pleasant on the outside, so nice and tender. And yet he had completely and utterly betrayed her. She knew what he was capable of, what he was willing to do, and the face he wore in public in no way reflected the person she knew he was.

She knew he was cruel, that he had deceived her to get her wealth and cast her aside when she was no longer useful. And yet as he stood there in the doorway he was... strangely... likeable?

The thought struck her that maybe she had avoided him these last two years, not because she hated him, but because she still loved him.

Chapter 12

Lucy knew that staying would be risky. But now she had two reasons not to leave. Not only did she wish to see Lord Jones and speak to him again, but she also needed to work out what exactly, if anything, she still felt for Duke Perry.

She had stayed away from him for so long that she had never considered it, but she had been very deeply in love with him, and however painfully their courtship had ended, she had never stopped loving him until that day. And perhaps she had continued to love him even after that. She needed to at least know, for closure's sake.

“I suppose I ought to let bygones be bygones,” she said, trying not to sound too obvious. “And I do enjoy talking with Lord Jones.”

Duke Perry's face practically lit up with relief and joy. “You have no idea how happy that has made me,” he said.

“How come?” she asked.

“How come?” he echoed in what appeared to be shock.

She was taken aback by the contorted look on his face that fell between disappointment and surprise.

“Because for two whole years my wife and her best friend have had to keep apart for no reason other than me. And it has been hurting me so grievously to be the source of your separation and pain. It is a great relief that finally we can all be friends again. Thank you, Lucy, for this.”

Lucy’s heart swelled at Duke Perry’s words. *Friends again*. A familiar ache swirled in Lucy’s stomach. Guilt, perhaps? Brief flashes of her actions of late appeared before her eyes.

Antoinette stood up and embraced her friend. “Yes, Lucy, thank you. This is one of the most mature things you have ever done, and I am so proud of you.”

But Duke Perry's words were playing in her mind. Was it possible...

Could he love her after all? Could it be that he had loved her, and had married Antoinette for some other practical reason? They seemed so happy together... and yet if he had feigned love and interest for Lucy, perhaps he was doing the same thing for her friend.

This was ridiculous.

Duke Perry was a married man. Lucy was just flattering herself. Or getting her hopes up. It was still not clear to her whether she still loved him. All she knew was that the possibility was very real. She had never had closure, she had never worked out what she did or did not feel for him. It had all ended in a flood of anger and tears, and then she had tried to block him from her life and her mind.

Following Duke Perry and Antoinette through to the drawing room, she eyed him up and down. He was definitely still handsome. But one could find a man handsome without loving him. This would be difficult to determine. But she needed to know whether she still had any feelings for him, and if she did, to trample them, so that they would never hurt her again.

Lord Jones arrived promptly after they were all seated. He looked dashing once again, with his hair impeccably combed back, a beautifully fitted coat and shirt, and expertly shined shoes. He looked like a man straight out of a painting, he was so clean and neat. And he smelled delightful. His presence alone reassured Lucy that she was at least able to find men besides Duke Perry attractive, whether she was still drawn to the Duke or not.

Lucy was pleased to discover that her mother had, as expected, skipped the offer of tea and sandwiches. This meant that not only would she be able to spend some time with her friends in peace, but she could perhaps venture into topics which her parents may have disapproved of.

After so many years in boarding school, where she was never in a position where she had to watch what she said or look out for her parents, it was somewhat stifling to be constantly watching her back now she was home. It was refreshing to be able to simply focus on her own interests.

At first, she avoided any talk of what had happened between herself and Duke Perry. But Lucy was sure that one could cut the tension with a knife. Both Duke Perry and Lord Jones were incredibly attractive men. And she had once loved Duke Perry, and was very close to Lord Jones. And neither was an option for marriage. It was like being in the middle of a bakery full of cakes when one was on a diet.

She longed for the intimacy and sensuality of marriage. She had seen Antoinette and Duke Perry exchanging affectionate glances and kisses. And she had seen Duke Haskett and Mary holding one another, kissing passionately, and touching one another sensually when they thought they were in private. Knowing that all that was out of her reach was a bitter torment to her, especially when she was sat at a small round table, with a handsome man at either side of her.

“I hear Thomas is marrying Julia, the poor fool,” Andrew said, sipping his tea. “Is that why he is absent?” In the presence of others she noticed there was a distinct coldness about him again. What had happened to the warmth she knew he held?

Antoinette nodded. “He is planning the wedding, yes. But they are very happy. I do not see why you should call him a fool.”

“He was in India just as I was,” Andrew replied with a shrug. “And Clara was quite incapable of remaining faithful that long.”

“I can assure you that Julia was faithful and patient. Let's not sully her name when she has made great sacrifices to remain true to her promises,” Antoinette insisted with a warning glare.

Andrew shook his head. “I do apologize. It is simply difficult for me to believe that a woman would be so kind to a man in his absence. It is not in my experience, at any rate. We give and give and you take and take, for all I have seen.”

“There are good women out there,” Antoinette replied.

“Yes, and they are all married, it seems,” Andrew said, sipping his tea some more. “What a man has to do to get such a woman is nothing short of ridiculous. I would rather be out on the Mission in India again than endure such games.”

“Women make our sacrifices and face our challenges too,” Antoinette insisted.

“I believe men get the worse deal by far,” he insisted. “All a woman has to do to get a decent man is... be there.”

“I suppose it depends on your definition of *decent*,” Lucy finally interjected. She was getting frustrated at how much pressure was being put on the female side of the equation. “Cause some men are definitely not worthy of marriage, yet expect a woman to be perfect.”

Again, she saw that flash of sincerity, of vulnerability, in Andrew's eyes. The mask fell slightly and he smiled softly. “It is not *perfection* to be loyal. It is simply decency.”

“Then perhaps decent men get decent women, and poorly behaved women get poorly behaved men,” Duke Perry said.

Andrew laughed. “In Clara's case? I do hope so. She deserves a taste of her own medicine.”

“I do not believe you would be saying such things if you had experienced what I did,” Lucy insisted.

Duke Perry looked sheepish again. And Lucy, despite herself, felt a sudden urge to comfort and reassure him, to let him know that she would not continue to judge him too harshly. She chastised herself. Nothing had changed. Just because she was forgiving his actions did not mean they had not happened, nor that he had made it up to her. She realised she truly did still love him.

Andrew nodded. “I think we have both experienced some dreadful things at the hands of the opposite sex, but I maintain that to be rejected is better than to be betrayed in your absence. Adultery is a worse sin than changing your mind.”

“Would it have hurt any less if she had told you?” Lucy said quietly.

Andrew paused. She could tell his heart was still as sore for Clara as hers was for Duke Perry. “Ah, but is this not the perfect opportunity to challenge our little theory?” Lord Jones asked, suddenly perking up. “We have both parties present, after all.”

Lucy felt a little uncomfortable. She still loved him. She had loved him these past two years. She could not attack him, even to defend herself.

“So, Duke Perry, Your Grace, what would you say to Lucy's accusation that you hurt her?” Andrew said.

Fortunately for Lucy, Duke Perry was just as uncomfortable about the situation as she was. He smiled and shrugged a little. “I suppose I did hurt her. I did not intend to, but I did.”

“And you, Lucy, what say you?” Andrew said, turning to face her.

“I just... cannot fathom why you would hurt me so much, knowingly,” she replied.

“He did not intend to hurt you,” Antoinette said as softly as she could.

Lucy was not sure where this was going, but she felt a little cornered. “I do not mean to attack you, Duke Perry... I simply want to say these things so that they never need be discussed again.”

Duke Perry nodded. “I suppose that makes sense. And Antoinette is

correct, I did not set out to hurt you. I simply did not have the opportunity to marry Antoinette. And then I did. I could not pass up our joint happiness."

"But then why did you approach me in the first place? I wish I knew better why you did what you did," Lucy said to Duke Perry. "Why not remain single, if you could not marry the woman of your dreams?"

"I thought I would never be able to marry her, and I was afraid, I suppose, of the burdens of being unwed." Duke Perry looked away, ashamed. "I needed money. And security. I feared you were the only woman whose parents would ever allow to marry me. I felt pressured."

Andrew nodded. "So as a man you did believe you were being pressured into an unhappy marriage? You did not do it out of cruelty?"

"Of course not! I suppose marriage is all about what one can get out of the arrangement," Duke Perry replied. "I was simply trying to get the material aspects of marriage. I had not considered the emotional purposes."

"And yet Clara, who had the opportunity to marry me, continued to lead me on as she was preparing to marry a lesser man," Lord Jones said with a heavy heart. "At least Duke Perry had great motive for abandoning you. At least he never loved you. Clara loved me and then lost interest in me."

"Because you were not present," Antoinette said. "It may be a harsh reason, but it is true nonetheless. What she wanted and needed from you was company, which you did not give her."

"If one cannot remain loyal to one's betrothed just because one cannot see them, does that not make one a bad person?" he countered.

"Not at all, women have emotional needs, and physical ones. She could not see you, or speak with you, or enjoy your affections. She was deprived and lonely. And he offered her support during her time of need," Antoinette explained. "It may not be right, but neither is abandoning your woman to roam India for a year or more."

Lord Jones seemed angry at what was being said, but bit his tongue. Lucy realised that he was in deep pain, but nobody else saw it. He was still reeling from Clara's rejection, but others only saw the tough exterior he was presenting. Every word against him was like a dagger through his already bleeding heart.

Lucy, on the other hand, felt she had been given much to contemplate. Having discovered that her hatred of Duke Perry stemmed from the remaining love she felt for him, she was opening herself up to new suggestions and ideas. And the discovery that men were just as trapped by the conventions of marriage as women were... this helped her. This was a healing thing to acknowledge.

Duke Perry was the good, tender man she had known during their courtship. Just because he did not love her did not make him a bad person. And just because he was good and tender did not mean she had to love him. He could be a good person and do bad things. Because this was a world where good people needed to do bad things in order to survive.

After the sandwiches had been had, Duke Perry and Antoinette left to find their baby daughter and spend some time with her. Meanwhile, Lucy followed Lord Jones out into the conservatory where he stood, staring out over the gardens, his mind obviously wandering.

“I do not suppose you believe all they said,” Lord Jones muttered, avoiding eye contact with her, sounding almost angry.

“Not all of it,” she said. “They have their own illusions, their own hopes, their own beliefs about love. Which may be true for them, but not for everyone.”

“And they turned it on you. As though Duke Perry could not help but deceive you,” Lord Jones said with a groan.

“I suppose in his circumstances he would not, though,” Lucy replied.

“He could have chosen to do the dignified thing and not abuse your love and trust,” Andrew said bitterly. “It was all lies to get you on their side.”

“Some of it was true, though,” Lucy insisted. “It makes perfect sense. Men and women alike are trapped by the conventions of marriage, by the financial and political forces which push us to wed even if it breaks our hearts to do so.”

“You are only agreeing with them because you still love Duke Perry, are you not?” Lord Jones said, suddenly turning and making eye contact with her.

Lucy shook her head nervously. “Not exactly... I simply... I do agree with them. And I need to forgive him. Because he is my best friend's husband, and I cannot hate him forever.”

“No, it is because you love him. Because you are trying to stay close to

him and heal the tears he left in your heart," Lord Jones said, stepping closer to her.

"So, what if I am?" she blurted. "He is a married man, nothing could happen. And I shall never marry, so it will cause me and my non-existent future husband no problems at all." He was towering over her, like a mountain over a valley. She felt her heart in her throat.

"Do not do this to yourself," Andrew said softly. "If you get too close to him you shall only be hurt again. You must stay strong, and stay away from him."

"I do not see why it is such a great problem to you," Lucy said, glaring at him, her face hot with shame. "It is not as though it harms you if I love him or not."

"Oh, but it does," Andrew replied.

Before Lucy could say anything, he seized her waist in one hand, put his other hand behind her head, and pulled her into a warm kiss.

She let out a gasp, then a soft moan at the unexpected touch. This. This was the sort of intimacy she had been craving. It was so wrong. And it felt so right. And she could not do it, never do it, because she could never marry... And yet she was doing it.

Her head was swimming. She felt about to faint. She put both her hands behind his head, tangled them in his perfectly waxed hair, and kissed him back.

Chapter 13

Lucy was not sure what at all to make of what had just happened. Her heart was still racing as she rejoined the company, as her parents came to see her, as they prepared to leave. She could still taste his mouth, she could smell his rich cologne in her hair, she could feel a warm pressure on the back of her head, as though his hands had moulded her like clay. It was intoxicating.

And yet utterly forbidden. He had done this to her despite not courting her, despite having no intent to marry, despite not being engaged. He had simply dived in and stolen a kiss. And what a kiss! It felt just like her fairytale romances had told her it would. Her heart beat faster and faster. He seemed to have vanished. She was not sure whether she hoped to see him before she left, or whether she would be too ashamed.

As the family coach pulled away from the house, she spied Lord Jones leaving, his usually perfect hair still slightly untidy, his hands a little shaky with nerves. He was just as excited about what had happened as she was. In a way, this egged her on. She wanted to do it to him again. She wanted to see him lose control, to watch that mask slide from his face and see the real man underneath. As the coach turned around the corner, obscuring him from her view, she sank back in her seat and wondered whether enough intimacy would break him, what he would be like when he opened up and was gentle and tender.

And yet they could not do this. They had committed to never marrying. It would be on some level forgivable if they were engaged, or if he asked for her hand in marriage. But he had tasted her lips with no intention of owning them. He had taken what her parents wanted to give to another man, what did not belong to him. He had tainted her.

On the other hand, she had no intention of marrying any other man. Who had he deprived of her lips? He had stolen nothing from anyone but herself. And you cannot steal that which is given freely. And she wanted to give him so much more...

She briefly wondered whether she could bear to live in sin. Whether she could remain unwed and yet every day make her way to Lord Jones's house and immerse herself in his company, savour his skin, let him grip her with his strong hands and mould her body under his weight. Whether she could bear a child out of wedlock, and raise it with his support.

But no, she could not. She could not live with that one kiss without guilt ravaging her mind, without desperately seeking justification. Although her body ached for him, and her heart felt sore and empty without him, she would have to receive the blessing of her parents and the permission of God before he could hold her like that. And Lord Jones would never marry.

Lucy sighed heavily. Her mother glanced at her nervously. “Are you quite alright?” Lady Fitzgerald asked. “You seemed flushed and feverish as we left, and now you look pale and clammy. Are you coming down with something?”

Lucy shook her head. “I have a lot on my mind, that is all mother.”

“My sweet... are you still in love with Duke Perry?” her mother asked. “I know it must be difficult for you to see him, even after all this time, with your best friend.”

“It is not that, I assure you,” she insisted. “I simply... it is difficult for me to see them together. But I must learn to carry myself with dignity.”

“You must, you must,” Lady Fitzgerald said. There was a slightly tense pause. “You do know that I can tell the signs of love, of passion,” she said.

Lucy blushed hotly. At least her mother did not know who Lucy was really thinking about. Or, for that matter, what she had done with him... “It is natural to reserve some feelings for a man I nearly married.”

“But he is now a respectably married Duke, and you ought to control yourself,” her mother insisted.

“I can and I will,” Lucy said, nodding firmly. Of course, she could and would. Duke Perry was a handsome, sweet man. But she could appreciate his charms without loving him. It would be much harder for her to control herself around the man who actually drove her passions...

“Now, listen, I have a plan to get you to meet the Prince, I am sure

you will be glad to hear," Lady Fitzgerald said.

Lucy just nodded and smiled dreamily to herself. She would do whatever her mother asked of her. Except marry, that is. But other than marry, she would do anything so long as she had another opportunity to get close to Lord Jones. She listened as Lady Fitzgerald explained the plan.

Lady Fitzgerald had managed to get a place at yet another dinner party with the Princess. And this time the Prince, as well as many other eligible, wealthy, powerful men, would be present. It would be the perfect opportunity for Lucy to revel in the company of royalty and prove her worth to them. By being seen as the Princess's friend, many lesser nobles would no doubt admire her and seek her company. So even if the Prince showed no interest at all, Lucy would have plenty of opportunities to meet other important people, from England and from Europe. And surely *one* of those distinguished men would be attractive to her.

Lucy just nodded in agreement and smiled and continued getting lost in her mind. She wanted so badly to be beside Lord Jones. But what else could she do? He was committed to never marrying. She could not exactly just live in sin, nor could she go back on her promise to herself, not least of all because she had made the same promise to Andrew. And if he was a man of any dignity and grace, he would chastise her for breaking her word.

But, then, if they could not be together under any circumstance, then why had he kissed her? Unless... Unless he was not as virtuous as she had at first assumed. Unless he intended for them to live in sin. Lucy was at once horrified and, though she would never admit to it, thrilled by the idea that a man could desire her so much as to risk his reputation to be with her.



The dinner party was two days later, and Lucy spent the entire time being alternately angry and excited by the idea of seeing Lord Jones yet again. Hopefully he would be there, and they could steal a moment together yet again.

No... She could not be so overt. She would have to leave the room by chance, and he would, also by chance, have to leave the room, so that they could completely accidentally meet in private, where he could once again be overwhelmed by his passionate urges and kiss her. It all had to be accidental. A carefully planned coincidence...

The day finally arrived and Lucy was able to spend some time thinking about something other than being kissed by Lord Andrew Jones. Now she had to meet with a Princess, and carry herself properly, assist in all she could, and mingle like a lady. This was her chance to shine in high society.

Her Highness was in a fabulous mood, and invited Lucy to spend the afternoon helping her prepare for the dinner party that night. It was going to be a more extravagant, less intimate event than last time, and everything had to be perfect in order to completely impress everyone. Lucy was shocked by how much work went into being a princess. She had thought it would be a matter of just ordering servants about, but in fact everything had to be carefully selected and later approved by Her Majesty. She could not afford to sit back and let everything happen, as if even a single thing went wrong it reflected poorly on her, not her servants.

“Your Highness works very hard,” Lucy remarked.

“My brother and I both endeavour to always present ourselves at our best,” Princess Elisaveta replied.

“I am simply amazed by all that Your Highness does,” Lucy added. “Especially considering that Your Highness is still unwed. I suppose Your Highnesses must have men and women lining up to wed, and simply are finding the choice difficult?”

“To be honest... I had not given it much thought,” Her Majesty laughed a little. “I am not yet prepared to wed.”

Lucy was surprised to hear this. “But surely, at your age, Your Highness, at our age... Well, here one gets married at this age.”

“Oh, and in Germany one usually does too, or used to. But times have changed. People are increasingly wary of marriage and all that it entails. And our duties as royals and nobles are becoming so vast, it would be unfair for us to have to also work on building a family amidst all of this,” the Princess explained.

“Oh... So, when would Your Highness consider marrying?” Lucy asked.

Princess Elisaveta paused, looking at the wall where a banner was being hung. “I am not sure. I have aunts who are also princesses, and they are not yet married at thirty-seven and forty.”

Lucy was dumbfounded. “Really? I... I find it hard to believe, Your Highness. They may never marry now...”

Princess Elisaveta shrugged. “They are not too concerned about such matters. They are quite happy to remain single forever.”

“Your Highness means to say that people... are not getting married?” Lucy was dumbfounded.

“It is not the same as it once was, Lucy,” Her Highness said, “we have other things to focus on.”

“It must be a lot of work, if Your Highnesses cannot even contemplate marriage,” Lucy said, watching as some servants began adding flowers to the looping banners around the walls.

“It is. Just because we are not first in line for the throne does not mean we do not have many duties. We came here to escape it all,” Her Highness Elisaveta said.

“Escape? It was that bad, Your Highness?” Lucy asked. The more she heard from the Princess, the more amazed she was at the hard work that being a royal entailed. She had thought it would be like in a fairy tale, but it seemed more like an honest living than anything else.

“Well... not so bad,” the Princess replied. “I suppose it would have been acceptable. The amount of work, that is. But the attitude of the people bothered me too. Other nobles and royals have all lost their faith and hope in everything. Not just marriage, but also their own hierarchies, their faith... all of it.”

“I suppose it is not a bad thing, that people are losing their fantastical ideals about marriage,” Lucy replied. “Here we must endure the complete opposite. People maintain their delusions for years and years, even into their own marriages, until something falls apart and then they are broken by it.”

“It is not quite so simple,” Princess Elisaveta insisted. “We need some amount of wonder to sustain ourselves. When nobody believes in anything anymore, then we get problems...” The Princess seemed genuinely concerned, even pained, as she said this.

Lucy was not sure what to make of it at all. A small part of her was pained that all that wonder was gone. But if it was based on a lie, then surely it would be for the best for it to go out of fashion? What could possibly go wrong if all they were doing was losing an infantile delusion that would only hurt them?

“I am not sure much harm could come from people seeing the truth, Your Highness,” she said.

Princess Elisaveta shook her head. “You do not understand. It is not

the truth. It is faith. People need to have faith in marriage, whether they hold it aloft or see it for what it is. Otherwise marriage disappears."

Lucy was a little perplexed at this. "But marriage surely cannot simply disappear? How do such matters work in Germany?"

Her Highness sighed. "I cannot speak for all of my people, not even for all of my class, but the people I have met who are disappointed in marriage have all been corrupted. A person can abstain from marriage all they want. But for most of us, we have passions we need to satisfy. We have human needs. One or two people can deprive themselves forever and live in abstinence. But for most people, losing faith in marriage is the first step to embracing debauchery. That is part of the reason I had to leave. The propositions which I have received from my equals and betters... I hope you, and no other woman, has to hear such vile things."

Lucy realised these words were ringing true to her. She had attempted to remain celibate and unwed, and yet she was contemplating a life of sin. Andrew... He was an absolute cynic when it came to marriage. And yet... her lips still tingled when she thought of his kiss. It had been magical.

She was being corrupted by the very forces which Her Highness spoke of. Lucy knew she had gone from a good girl who believed in marriage, to a celibate cynic, to a passionate young woman considering sin. The influences of her own cynicism would destroy her if she allowed them to.

"Does Your Highness not think that we ought to be able to remain unwed and enjoy one another's company in an abstinent union?" Lucy asked. "I would very much enjoy such an arrangement." She felt her own mind tell her off for lying so blatantly. She would not enjoy that arrangement at all. She wanted to taste Lord Jones's lips again.

"In an ideal world people would, yes," Her Highness Elisaveta said. "But this is not an ideal world. People are very much fans of the flesh."

Lucy nodded. "I suppose we only have two options if we wish to remain godly," she said. "How does Your Highness manage?"

"I have not yet encountered a man to inspire much passion in me. Nor has my brother encountered such a woman. Some of our relatives have taken on lovers and mistresses, others have married. I would like to think I should be of the kind to marry," Her Highness explained.

“I see,” Lucy replied, nodding.

It was a little uncomfortable for Lucy to discuss such matters so candidly. And yet she experienced a sudden, almost engulfing fascination with this forbidden world. The idea that somewhere out there, lived people engaging in carnal relations outside of marriage, supporting one another in their pursuits. No contract, no eternal union, no trickery. Just love and consummation. The thought was so tempting...

Before she could ask any more, a servant announced the arrival of the first guest. Lucy did not quite catch the name, but the footsteps followed shortly after.

Lucy looked up. It was a young woman with thick, honey-coloured curls hanging about her face, wearing a pastel green dress, a pearl necklace about her neck. Lucy recognized her, but she was not sure from where...

Chapter 14

“Ah, Clara,” Princess Elisaveta said with a big smile. “It is wonderful you could make it.”

The woman curtsied deeply. “Thank you for inviting me, Your Majesty. It is a great honour,” she replied.

Lucy, unsure how exactly one ought to behave in these circumstances, curtsied slightly back.

“Oh, and this is Lucy, another friend of mine,” Her Highness added.

Lucy was about to ask for Clara's second name and title, and it seemed as though Clara wanted to say something, probably to ask the same thing. But Princess Elisaveta was suddenly called away by a masculine voice with a foreign accent, most likely her brother, and vanished, leaving the two girls looking at one another.

Lucy knew she had seen this woman somewhere before, but she was not quite sure where. It must have been some time ago. She smiled politely. “You seem familiar, though your name seems to elude me.”

“I am Clara Neal,” she replied. “I was raised around these parts, but went to London two years ago. Does that help at all?”

Lucy shook her head. “I only returned from many years of boarding school two years ago, I must have just missed seeing you. I wonder where I have seen you before...”

“I am not sure,” she replied. “You seem vaguely familiar too, though. Lucy Fitzgerald, is it not?”

Lucy nodded. “It is. I suppose we must know one another...”

They began talking of how they had grown up, and how much the area had changed since they were little. And the more Clara said, the more convinced Lucy became that she had grown up alongside her. It was just difficult to connect this adult with any of the children she had known when she was younger.

Then, it hit her. “You went to school with Antoinette and I, before I

went to boarding school. You were a gifted child, and I was quite typical, so we attended different classes during the day, but we used to go to piano lessons and Sunday school together."

Clara nodded and grinned. "Yes! I remember now. You and Antoinette Byrd would always be getting in trouble together. So rebellious. Her cousin was in my classes, but we never got along. I always wondered what it would be like to be one of the naughty children."

Lucy was somewhat surprised. She remembered Clara now, but not as the svelte, elegant blonde in front of her. She remembered a shabbily dressed, awkward girl with pigtails and so many freckles and spots she looked like she had never washed her cheeks. It made sense that Lucy had not recognized her. And yet... the name still rang a bell. Besides school. Something... more recent,

"What have you done since we last met?" Lucy asked, hoping to shine a light on this mystery.

Clara shrugged. "As I said, I have been in London. My education paid off well and I had many fine suitors. My parents are rather proud. But I have mostly continued to study and court. How about yourself?"

"I was in boarding school for most of that time," Lucy replied with a slight laugh. "But in the two years since I came home a lot has happened. I have had a few suitors myself. My friends are getting married. A friend's brother has returned from India."

"India?" Clara asked, perking up a little. "It seems everyone is going there lately..."

Lucy nodded. "Yes, but so long as they come home in one piece I am glad. What kept you from coming home these last two years? I believe this is the first time I have seen you in town since I returned."

"I have been a little busy, I was engaged for four years, don't you know? But..." Clara hesitated and sighed. "It did not work as planned."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that," Lucy replied. "I suppose things do not always work out as intended."

Clara nodded. "It is behind me now, of course. That does not make it much easier, but it is important to remember that it is all in the past."

"I have also lost someone who I thought loved me," Lucy replied.

"I do still think he loved me," Clara said, "and I loved him dearly. But we just could not be together. I spent every day in fear that he would

die and leave me a young spinster, or a widow. I could not marry a man who was not prepared to give up his dangerous life for me. It would not have been fair on myself, or my future children."

Lucy nodded. "I suppose it is a little different to what I went through, in that case. But I do still sympathize with what you have endured."

It genuinely hurt her to know that her childhood friend had been going through such a hard time. Nobody deserved to go through so much heartache, so much misery, to make such difficult decisions. And yet it seemed as though everyone did. Lucy's resentment of marriage only grew. If people were upfront and honest about their intentions and needs, then this would not happen. It was marriage's fault that so many people suffered.

"I suppose it must be difficult to get back into the usual routine of courtship when one has been hurt so badly," she said.

"Oh, not at all," Clara replied. "That is the easy part. Courting comes naturally. Like eating, or breathing, or sleeping. He is on my mind to this day, but I am already engaged again, this time to a man who serves my interests better."

"But... how can you marry someone else when you loved your last fiancé so earnestly?" Lucy asked, baffled.

Clara shook her head. "I love my current fiancé earnestly too. And he is better suited to me. I do still mourn the loss of my last relationship, but I must go on. I cannot wallow in that. It is only through new love that I can heal."

"But... what if it were to happen again?" Lucy asked.

Clara shook her head again. "It should not. These are the things you talk about when you begin courting anew. What about yourself? Are you courting now?"

"Yes, but I suppose I am not doing so in earnest," Lucy replied. This was confusing to her. "I had such a hard time recovering from my betrayal..."

Clara nodded. "It must be different when someone betrays you. I feel I can trust my fiancé to be honest with me, as both of them were. On the other hand, I suppose that if you cannot trust someone to be honest, then no relationship can form. You might have a longer path ahead of you than I did."

Lucy shuffled her feet a little and averted her gaze. "I suppose that makes sense. I had not considered that. Does it hurt much, when you

are the one rejecting the other?"

"Have you never rejected a suitor?" Clara asked.

Lucy shook her head and made eye contact again. "Never one I liked. I have always rejected men from lack of interest, not for practical reasons."

"It does hurt, I will not lie," Clara said, "but it is also... liberating. To know that one can move away from something that is not ideal, that the world does not end just because something was not meant to be. It made me see that there are more options, and that I can be happy if I choose what is right for me."

"So, you felt better when you found your new fiancé?" Lucy asked, still a little confused. "Or did you start feeling better first, and then meet him?"

"Oh, it was still painful when we first began courting," Clara confessed. "Everything we did was like a repeat of the last time, and it made me sad for what I had lost, and scared of losing it again. But life must go on. I still think the world of him. I believe if you ever love someone you will never completely cease to love them. But I cannot commit myself to someone who sees me as secondary."

Lucy paused. That was most likely what was at the root of most courtship problems and failed marriages, now she began to think about it. When two people put one another and their marriage first, even in the face of hurdles they would endure and their love, like a phoenix, would reignite.

But when the most important thing on one party's mind was something else, then the marriage suffered. When the man believed his work was his life, when the woman became lost in childrearing, when money, travel, and petty disputes took centre stage, even a happy marriage could disintegrate. Yet when a couple worked hard at it, love blossomed in even the most troubled of circumstances.

"Who was this man, that you still love him so much?" Lucy asked.

"Lord Andrew Jones," Clara said. "He is lovely, he really is... but his travels always came first." She sighed heavily and looked out the window.

"Lord Andrew Jones from Holly Hall?" Lucy asked.

Clara turned abruptly and nodded. "Yes."

"Baron Andrew Jones?" Lucy asked again.

Clara nodded again and laughed a little. “Yes, that is he. I still love and admire him greatly. I am sure if you know him personally you would understand why.”

Lucy could only stare. It all made sense now. *She* was the Clara who Lord Jones had been speaking of. And yet... she was nothing like Andrew's Clara. Andrew's Clara was a cold and calculating woman who had begun courting her next suitor without ever telling Andrew. Andrew's Clara was a woman who would leap into bed with the first man she saw as soon as Andrew was on the boat. Andrew's Clara was a figment of Andrew's imagination.

Just as Lucy's idea of Duke Perry had become clouded by her own passionate love, disappointment, and hatred of him, Andrew's idea of Clara was slowly distorting due to his own passions.

Sitting down for dinner, Lucy was suddenly glad that Lord Jones had not come. It would have been awkward to say the least. Andrew might not be as cold and cynical on the inside as he appeared on the outside, but he was nevertheless a very angry man. Clara and Andrew's joint presence at the party would make for a lot of drama and trouble. It was quite likely that his absence was due to Her Highness's intentional omission of an invitation for him. Princess Elisaveta knew what she was doing.

Lucy found herself again realizing how foolish she had been. She had assumed that Lord Jones's argument was the truth, that he had presented the situation objectively and reasonably. And how could he have? He was not even in England when Clara made her decision to end their engagement. He was not in England when she began courting again. He had not been there to know what had taken place. Lucy felt bad for taking his words at face value.

But now she had the opportunity to find out the other side of the story and to make a wiser judgement. Knowing what she did of both Andrew and Clara, and knowing what they believed the situation had been. Much like when she and Duke Perry had talked and she had seen it was not his intention to be cruel, now she could balance both sides of the argument and see the humans behind it.

And yet this made her worry. She had been wrong so many times now. She had been forced to grow up so many times over in her head. It was starting to seem as though nothing she believed was right. The more she found out about the people around her, and about the world, the more wrong she was. She was wrong about princesses, about men, about Duke Perry, about Clara Neal, about celibacy... So, who was to say she was not wrong about many other things also?

Was it possible that she would reconsider her views on marriage? Considering the pattern, she had been following, it was very likely.

Words uttered by Antoinette and by her own mother echoed in her mind. They had said she was wrong. They had said she would change her mind. They had said she would eventually marry. And they could still be right. How humiliating it would be, to have to swallow her words and admit she wanted to marry after all. How embarrassing when her mother began planning her wedding in a frenzy, and her friends gave her those knowing glances. She would be reminded of her vow to remain single for years to come. And then, when her marriage began falling apart as so many did, she would have to be reminded that she had not wanted to get married in the first place, that she had so foolishly gone back on her word...

No, she needed to double down on her commitment. She knew that marriage could not possibly work out. It was not a problem to reconsider minor things, such as matters of character. But marriage was a life sentence, and not one she was ready to live.

She could yet avoid the seductive appeal of a life with Lord Jones, of romance, of conventional relationships. She could yet defend herself against the possibility of being tricked into changing her mind.

She just needed to be more on her guard than ever before.

Chapter 15

The dinner was a beautiful affair. The Princess clearly knew what she was doing, as every single element came together. The decoration was refined but not too obsequious, the men and women were seated alternately, and soft piano music played in the background. It felt like a relaxed, refined evening. It had to take a lot of skill to make so much luxury look understated.

And even though Lord Jones was not there, Lucy found her company to be excellent. She was seated between a married man on one side, and Clara's fiancé on the other, so she was under no pressure.

Clara, another seat across from her fiancé, was wonderful conversation too. Lucy was very glad that Andrew was absent. This way she would have an opportunity to truly get to know Clara, without his own hatred taking over the conversation and clouding her mind. In his pain, Andrew was able to turn any topic bitter, and Lucy was beginning to see that his approach was not necessarily the best one.

Lucy was enjoying talking about topics ranging from high society, to religion, to the empire. It was not what she wanted to talk about with Clara, but it made for more polite conversation, and it allowed her to discover Clara's true nature.

Then, the arrival of the Prince was announced. A silence fell over the entire table, and all, the Princess included, stood up and bowed their heads solemnly. Lucy could feel a certain tension in the air. Glancing across the table she saw that most of the young women were looking towards the head of the table, waiting to catch their first glimpse of a real prince.

It took a few minutes for him to arrive, and during that time Lucy heard a few excited whispers and a few shushing voices. Again, it struck her how ridiculous all this was. He was only a person, just like his sister was. And yet all these nobles were treating him like some kind of a sideshow freak, like some fantasy being come to life. There was nothing special about him at all...

And then she saw him.

Prince Ferdinand. She had to take back some of her thoughts as she watched him move to the head of the table. He was an impressive figure of a man. He was tall, with a broad back and strong arms which made the sleeves of his shirt taut. His golden hair shone angelically, contrasting with his silver eyes. His face looked like a statue of a Greek god, it was so sharp, so masculine, so perfectly proportioned. And dressed in his luxurious, exotic robes and jewels, he looked a world apart from any man Lucy had ever seen.

He sat down at the head of the table and waved his hand smoothly, encouraging his guests to sit back down and continue drinking their wine. He sipped from his own glass and, with a humoured glimmer in his eyes, surveyed the table. Slowly Lucy heard the voices rise up in conversation once again. But her eyes remained stuck on the Prince.

Lucy was so torn as she observed him. She had been telling herself that it would be impossible for any man to seduce her into marriage. But Prince Ferdinand was something else. It was not just his appearance which was, quite frankly, exactly what she had pictured a prince to look like in her fairy tales. No, there was something more to him. A strength of character which was evident even several seats down the table. A passion which burned so hotly inside him that it left him positively glowing. An aura of sheer power and beauty, the likes of which she had never seen before. Prince Ferdinand was not just a human male, he was a Man, and every fibre of her body was begging for her to bear his children.

She chastised herself as she watched him. She did not know him. She had nothing in common with him, as far as she knew. All she knew was that he was attractive. How would that make him a good marriage prospect? She might have been experiencing a more intense form of lust than ever before, but it was simple, animal lust nonetheless. Why did she have to be so desperate for male attention?

Lucy sighed and shook her head.

“He is quite something, is he not?” Clara said.

“Clara!” Lucy exclaimed softly. She glanced at Edmund, her fiancé.

Edmund shook his head. “I must also admit he is an admirable man. It does not mean anything for Clara to recognize greatness when she sees it.”

“But is it not rude to make remarks like that about a man we shall never marry?” Lucy asked.

“It is how we are made, men and women,” Clara replied. “God put us on this earth to go forth and multiply. And that would hardly work if we found one another repulsive, now, would it?”

“But God made us man and woman, too,” Lucy replied, “to join in one flesh as husband and wife.”

Clara nodded. “And I can join in one flesh with Edmund for all of my life. That does not mean I will never admire another man. Simply that I must do so from afar.”

This was another alien concept to Lucy. She had battled so much with her own morality, her own virtue. She had never considered that perhaps the battle was fine, it was only surrender that was a problem.

And yet... Clara had a fiancé who suited her very well. Her future was not threatened by lust. She could look at Prince Ferdinand, admire his physique and his presence, and then go home to a man who met her personal needs. Lucy was not in the same position. She had nobody to meet her needs. When she laid eyes upon men like Duke Perry, Lord Jones, or Prince Ferdinand, all she could do was surrender herself to her feelings of lust. Nobody would satisfy them. She was fighting a losing battle against her own desires, and she would need to fight it her whole life.

Nevertheless, she could not help but continue to observe Prince Ferdinand over the course of dinner. His every movement was as graceful as his sister's. His aura drew her eyes to him every time they wandered across the table. His body enticed her. Perhaps her mother was right. It would be a fantastic thing to be married to such a man. And she could confidently say that he would not be after her money.

As the party drew to a close, Lucy wondered whether she could perhaps meet with the Prince, and get her first step towards courting him. Whether the courtship led anywhere or not, she needed to start it and fast. She may never have another opportunity to get close to Prince Ferdinand. This could be her one and only chance. And it was better to seize the opportunity and not like him, than to miss the opportunity and find out he was suited to her.

Leaving the dining room, she realised there was just one door in and out. So as the remaining nobles followed Princess Elisaveta to the drawing room for digestifs and sweets, Lucy waited patiently outside the door. Prince Ferdinand did not emerge with the rest of the party, but she knew he could not stay in there forever. He would have to come out, and through that door.

Lucy knew this would be more difficult than courting a standard

noble. She had not even been able to exchange words with him at dinner. They had exchanged a glance but once. They had not only a class barrier, but a cultural barrier, and possibly a language barrier between them. But something told her he would be ideal. He was so magnetic... so naturally appealing.

No... she could not sell herself on this. She had to get to know him, piece by piece, just like any other man. She had to give him a fair chance. She could not afford to inflate his worth before even meeting him. He would have to prove himself, like any other man.

Trying to keep her mind blank, she waited in the hallway patiently. And, surely enough Prince Ferdinand emerged. He seemed a little flustered, but was smiling happily. Lucy could smell the scent of brandy on him. She caught herself trying to excuse it, to tell herself that it was fine because he was a royal at a dinner party. She reminded herself to hold him to the same standards as anyone else.

He locked eyes with her and smiled a wide, roguish grin. “Hello,” he said, his accent heavy, but not quite as rough or harsh as she had expected. “May I help you?”

“Sorry to intrude, Your Highness, but I could not help but notice Your Highness at the head of the table, and was wondering if I might be so bold as to talk with Your Highness?” she said, feeling her face grow hotter and hotter as he scrutinized her.

“No, I am used to it,” he said. “You know my sister, do you not?”

“I do, Your Highness,” Lucy replied, “Her Highness is quite charming.”

“As are you,” Prince Ferdinand said.

Lucy blushed and giggled. “I... Why thank you, Your Highness,” she replied. She was not sure what else to say. She had never met a man who spoke quite like that before, who was quite so straightforward.

“No need to thank me, it is true,” he said, “and please, call me Ferdinand, I want to hear you say my name.”

Lucy averted her gaze. “Of course... Ferdinand...” The request struck her as a little peculiar, but he was foreign, and a Prince. Perhaps he was a bit of a peculiar man.

“Are you engaged to be wed, Lucy?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I do not exactly believe in marriage.”

“Oh, neither do I. Not exactly,” he replied.

As he spoke he was moving closer to her. Perhaps... Perhaps he genuinely was interested? Lucy had not held the hope very high in her heart. After all, he was a Prince. A minor Prince of a European country, but a Prince nonetheless. She could smell not just the brandy, but a rich cloud of perfume and an underlying scent of pure masculinity, musky and rich. He placed a hand on her waist and ran it down to her hip. She froze. She was not at all sure what to make of this now. Especially after Lord Jones...

This could be perfect. Prince Ferdinand was already showing an interest in her which most men would not. Her heart skipped as she realised that a literal prince now had both hands upon her. He drew her in close to his body. Looking up into his eyes, she saw them glowing, resplendent with passion. His hands gripped her firmly and drew her even closer. She gasped slightly, feeling suddenly panicked.

Prince Ferdinand moved in to lock lips with her. This was it, the moment of truth. She had a prince kissing her. She could make him hers. She moved her mouth on his, trying her hardest to impress him. She felt him trying to pull her body even closer, trying to close the gap between them. She stood firm. A kiss was one thing, but she would not press her body up against a man's, not even if that man was a prince.

After a few attempts to get her up against his strong torso, Prince Ferdinand stopped pressuring her, instead gently sliding his hands up and down her waist, caressing her gently, sending shivers down her spine. But... the shivers did not feel good.

Lucy was not sure why, but this was absolutely nothing like kissing Lord Jones. This was wrong. This was scary. Prince Ferdinand was far more forceful, far more interested in ways which Lord Jones had not been. Lucy felt on her guard, knowing full well that he could at any moment attempt to force her body up against his.

She felt a tongue press against her lips and parted them to let it in. But it did not feel right. She did not want to carry on. She did not love this man. She did not even know him. Her body wanted him, but her mind was calling her crazy and her heart was scared.

Lucy broke the kiss and pulled her head back. She could not do this. It was wrong. It was not like when she had kissed Lord Jones, when her body had a mind of its own and had carried her to passionately kiss a man who she related to on an intimate level. This was just a passing fancy, a slight admiration for a man who was, indeed, admirable. But admiring someone was not cause enough to do... this.

Prince Ferdinand stared at her, a little perplexed, before moving in for another kiss. Lucy turned her head to one side so he could not touch her lips. He moved to that side, and she turned her head again.

“Do not be like that,” Ferdinand said in a low voice. “I know what you want...” His hands gripped her even more firmly than before and he pulled her towards him.

She realised that the smell of brandy and perfume, which had been somewhat interesting at first, was now just repulsive. She could not. This was a terrible idea.

Planting her hand firmly in the middle of his chest, Lucy shoved him away. Her push was wildly ineffective. This tall, broad man just stood there. She may have well been trying to push a mountain over, or push a hole in the sky.

Prince Ferdinand's hands let go of her nevertheless. He looked down into her eyes, once again scrutinizing her face, trying to make sense of what was happening. He reached his hand out towards her waist tentatively, and she slapped it. Prince or no prince, he had to understand she was not that sort of a woman.

He seemed to suddenly understand, his eyes growing wide in realization. “I am sorry,” he said, “I thought you wished to... never mind...” Although he was apologizing, Lucy could detect a hint of aggression, of indignant anger from him. “I shall... I shall see you some other time,” he added. There was barely a hint of nervousness in his voice. Just anger and confusion.

He turned around and began to walk towards the staircase. Out of the dining hall doors another young woman emerged. Lucy recognized her from the party. Her dress was much more loosely laced than earlier, and her hair was in disarray. She smiled eagerly at the Prince. He smiled back apologetically, shrugged, and headed upstairs.

Her head bowed in shame, the young woman marched down the hallway, towards the front door, pushing past Lucy without making eye contact.

Chapter 16

She was not quite sure what had just happened. But she felt overwhelmingly relieved that she had stopped it. Prince Ferdinand had definitely not been interested in courting her. That was not how anyone treated a woman they loved and respected. And how could he love or respect her anyway? He had just met her in that hallway. No, Lucy had a feeling something terrible could have happened if she had not rejected him. Especially after seeing that young woman leaving, so ashamed and scared...

She realised what the Prince had meant with everything he had said. He had thought she was like that girl. He had thought Lucy was waiting to seduce him, to join him in his bedroom, or indeed on the dining room table. He had thought she was the sort of girl who would sacrifice anything for the chance of marrying a prince. After all, why else would she have waited for him, alone, in the empty hallway of his house? Why else would she have allowed him to kiss her like that?

Her heart was still beating a thousand times a minute, hard against her ribs. But this was not like with Lord Jones. This was painful. It was not who she was. It was not what she wanted to do with her life. And yet there she stood, alone in a hallway, having almost allowed herself to be ruined by a man who would never even consider marrying her. The thought of how much she had almost lost was terrifying to her.

She wondered whether she ought to leave straight away. After all, what good could come from the evening now? She could rejoin the party and remain there in shame, with everyone knowing what she had just done. Or she could rejoin the party and nobody might have noticed her absence, but she would have to live with her nerves on edge, constantly on lookout for Prince Ferdinand, terrified of even making eye contact with him again.

But she knew that leaving would look even worse. She had barely been absent a few minutes. Few would suspect that anything had happened in that time. It was barely enough time for a bathroom visit. If she went home, however, then people would be able to speculate

about what she had done between leaving the party and heading to her coach. And she knew exactly what they would assume she had been doing.

About to head back to the party, she spied a figure at the bottom of the hallway, just outside the door to the drawing room. He held his hat and cane in one hand, but his coat had already been taken. He was watching her intently.

It was Andrew. Lucy smiled and waved. Then she paused. He was smiling now, but for a brief second, she had thought he was glaring at her angrily. And that was the last thing she wanted, after all which had happened that day. Another angry man... a man she loved.... no, a man she *respected*, nonetheless. She was not ready to handle that just yet. She resumed her waving, forcing herself to smile again. He waved back and began to walk towards her.

“Lucy! How wonderful to see you here,” he remarked.

She curtsied. “It is wonderful to see you also,” she replied. “I trust that you are well?”

He nodded. “Yes, I am. I hope you are as well... Your makeup is looking a little smudged. Just had dinner?”

Glancing at her reflection in the window, Lucy realised that her lipstick had been smeared by Prince Ferdinand, leaving a pink mark around her lips. That could not do. Anyone who saw her looking like that would immediately know what she had done.

Lord Jones handed her a handkerchief. “Here, just wipe it off,” he said softly, almost as though he knew what she was thinking, what she had done. And yet he did not comment on it. He did not chastise her. He just spoke tenderly to her, and offered the handkerchief.

“Thank you,” she replied quietly, taking the handkerchief and wiping all her lipstick off.

“Much better,” he replied. As he took the handkerchief, his hand lingered on hers before releasing her fingers, and tucking the handkerchief into his pocket out of sight. Fire coursed through her body.

Lucy wondered how much Andrew had seen, how much he knew. Normally he would confront someone directly if they seemed to be acting suspiciously. He would mock them and tease them. He would have no mercy. She felt that if he merely suspected her of improper behaviour, he would already be bullying her, at least in jest. But now

he was being... very sensitive. Very careful. Almost too careful. As though he knew about the turmoil she was suffering.

“I did not know you were invited,” Lucy remarked, trying to take her mind off that matter.

Lord Jones nodded. “Oh, I was. I wrote back saying I had no time for dinner, but would stop by for some drinks. Speaking of which, I think we ought to make our way to the drawing room. Before the others realize you're out here trying to seduce a prince, and begin a witch hunt for you.”

“Is it so obvious?” Lucy said shyly.

“I am just surprised you thought standing in a hallway would work,” Lord Jones replied. There was a slight undertone of pain to his voice, as though he was trying to stay cheerful, yet still felt betrayed.

“I suppose I thought I was being clever,” Lucy replied.

“And what would you have done, had you managed to seduce a prince?” Lord Jones asked.

Lucy paused and shrugged. “I am not sure.”

“Because I thought you were committed to not marrying,” he added.

“I have,” Lucy said, not wanting to lose credibility. “But... I still find men attractive. I cannot help that.”

Lord Jones seemed a little crestfallen to hear this. “And I suppose Prince Ferdinand is all you had hoped?” he asked.

Lucy shook her head and laughed a little. “I dare say I was right all along. Princes are overrated.”

Lord Jones nodded and smiled in relief. “I do believe all royalty and nobility is overrated,” he replied.

“Then why did you agree to come to a dinner party hosted by a Prince and a Princess?” Lucy asked, raising an eyebrow.

Andrew briefly looked caught out, but then composed himself and shrugged. “I do not enjoy socializing, but I do not dislike it either. It is something which I do on my own terms. If I am invited somewhere, I may go if the time suits me and there will be good drink.”

As they walked into the drawing room, Lucy was relieved to see that nobody was looking towards the door. Nobody had noticed her absence, or their arrival. It would have looked odd, the two of them

arriving at the same time. But then perhaps she could have claimed she had went to the front door to greet him?

She began looking around, wondering if it would be for the best to keep Andrew and Clara away from one another. She was not sure how they may react upon seeing each other.

“What is the matter?” Lord Jones asked. “Are you looking for someone?”

“It is... I am not sure how to say this,” Lucy replied.

“Just say it,” Lord Jones insisted, “it shall not bother me.”

“Clara is here,” Lucy said cautiously. “I thought you were not invited because I thought Her Highness had only invited Clara. And I would rather that the two of you did not meet, seeing how hostile you are towards her.”

“Oh... I see...” Andrew replied. “I shall do my utmost to avoid her,” he added. He looked more than a little uncomfortable and he too scanned the room before making his way to the table where the liqueurs were being served.

Lucy, after looking around and not seeing a bright blonde head anywhere, followed Lord Jones and accepted a small glass of her own. “Really, you ought to have a digestif after dinner,” she said.

Lord Jones smiled. “Then I suppose this is my dinner, and I shall have another one to follow it,” he swallowed his drink in one solid gulp. It was quite clear to Lucy that he was nervous. Again, she was surprised. He was normally so bold and brazen to everyone. It was only in front of her that he let that mask slip. But now it was slipping, not because of her, but because of another woman. Because of Clara Neal. She was beginning to see what he was doing.

Whenever he was in front of a member of society he had no care for, he exaggerated that disinterest to a point of disrespect, to push them away. But when a woman he had affections for was present, he was unable to disrespect her. Unlike most people, who have a standard public face that is moderate and likeable, he only had a rude mask, which he could not bear to wear in front of someone he cared about. And so he was forced to reveal his true self. Which he seemed to hate.

Lucy found herself stifling a yawn. It had been a long day. She felt a little tired, but she did not want to leave Lord Jones's side. He was just the sort of company she needed. She stepped a little closer to him. After what had happened with Prince Ferdinand, she wanted to feel

safe again. She wanted to feel protected again. She watched him as he quietly drank his brandy and watched the room.

He did not have the same look in his eyes as Prince Ferdinand. He did not look proud or satisfied, like he was surveying his belongings. He looked... disdainful. And bored. Prince Ferdinand had looked like a bull overlooking his cattle. Lord Jones looked like a well-fed cat watching mice scurry around him.

“Why are you clinging so close to me?” Lord Jones remarked, as the servant poured his third drink. He sounded a bit warmer and happier all of a sudden, as though the earlier events had been forgotten. “You are like a little girl hiding behind her mother's skirts.”

“I enjoy talking to you, when you are not so quiet,” she replied.

“I see,” he replied with a smile.

“Besides, it was you who waited for me in the hallway. Are you following me?” she asked with a giggle.

“I suppose I very much enjoy your company,” Lord Jones replied. A slight flush took over his face. “You are not unattractive, you are intelligent, you have a refreshing outlook... and, most importantly, you often agree with me, which means I do not need to introspect too much.”

Lucy giggled. “Is too much introspection a bad thing?”

He nodded. “Well, it does make me question my own genius,” he replied with exaggerated affect.

But she did not like that tone. She preferred it when he was blushing and awkward. “I would be surprised if you did not enjoy my company, after last time,” Lucy whispered to him, knowing full well what it would do to him.

The blush began to creep back up and he drew a sharp breath. “Yes, I suppose that may have been a little of a hint as to my... opinion of you,” he replied, avoiding looking her in the eye.

She moved a little bit closer. “I am tired and shall be heading home. Will Your Grace see me to the door?” she whispered.

It was amazing what an effect it had on him when she leaned in and whispered her thoughts ever so gently. He shivered a little, blushed an even deeper shade of red, and just nodded. It was wonderful to see him blushing like that, to see the vulnerability he had beneath his harsh exterior. He presented his arm for her, and she wrapped her

little fingers around it, feeling how strong he was under his suit. Possibly as strong as Prince Ferdinand. It was just that Lord Jones did not wear clothes two inches too tight to show himself off. She rubbed his arm subtly. This was much better.

Lucy had half expected him to kiss her again at the door. It seemed as though he was going to. He paused as she asked the servant for her coat and bonnet, then as soon as they were alone again he gazed into her eyes and lowered his face towards hers. But as he leaned in he suddenly stopped and put his head to one side, perplexed.

“What is the matter?” she asked quietly.

“I am not sure I like the smell of brandy on you... nor that perfume,” he replied, pulling back a little. “You ought to choose something a little more feminine, like your usual scent,” he said with a slight smile.

She nodded. But she was wearing her usual scent. Only over the top... the smell of Prince Ferdinand had worn off on her. She smelled of his brandy, his cologne, and that poor girl's perfume. And Andrew could smell it on her.

She felt a burning shame, to know that Lord Jones could possibly tell that she had been used like that. She looked to the floor. “I suppose I shall wear my usual one tomorrow,” she replied, hoping he had not noticed.

He nodded. “That would be wise. I like how you usually smell.”

Before she could say anything else, the moment was gone. The servant was back with her coat and bonnet, and it was time for her to head home. Her lips were still burning with desire for Andrew, but they would have to wait. She smiled softly and nodded. “Please see me to the door.”

He nodded back. “Of course, Lucy.”

He followed her to the door. She subtly caressed his hand as she was about to leave. She turned around and their eyes met. He was perfect. She sighed. She needed him. She stepped a little closer, looking at his lips, wondering if the servant would say anything should she kiss Lord Jones then and there.

He coughed a little to himself. “Well, we shall meet again soon,” he said nervously.

She nodded and smiled. “Yes, we shall.” He was right. They could get caught...

But as she descended the stairs, another thought crossed her mind. Had he rejected her? Turning around, she saw he was no longer waiting in the doorway. Only the servant stood there. Had Lord Andrew Jones smelled another man on her, and turned her away?

She was heartbroken and ashamed to have been caught with Prince Ferdinand's scent on her. But why? It was no crime to be showing interest in other men. She was not married to Lord Jones.

Then it struck her. That was precisely it. She wanted to marry Lord Jones.

What on earth had she gotten herself into?

Chapter 17

Lucy could not get Lord Jones off her mind at all anymore. At least before she was able to lie to herself, to tell herself she was not really interested. But now she had tasted his lips, all she wanted was to taste them again and again. It was pure torture, being kept away from him.

She pushed her breakfast around on her plate. She knew her mother would be furrowing her brow in worry at seeing her not eating. But she had no appetite. All she felt like doing was sitting in her room, daydreaming about marrying Lord Jones. He would look so dashing standing at the top of that aisle, light streaming in through stained glass windows, a white rose tucked into the breast of his jacket...

But she had committed to never marrying... and it was *him* she had made the promise to, no less! She sighed. She had been incredibly foolish after all.

“Are you well?” her mother asked softly.

Lucy shook her head and sighed. “I fear I may never marry,” she confessed.

“Oh, I knew you truly did care,” her mother said, sounding relieved. “And it worries me too. But I am sure that fate has great plans for you. So do not be afraid.”

Lucy sighed again.

“I am sure there is a perfect man out there for you, and we will meet him, and you will marry him. You shall see,” her mother continued.

Lucy carried on pushing her food around the plate in circles. But she had already met the perfect man...

She had not given up yet, of course. However down she was feeling, she knew she had to keep trying her luck. She was determined to see him again. Perhaps he would be willing to change his mind about the pact if she were to prove her worth to him. But she was tired and frustrated and ashamed. She should have known this would happen.

Antoinette had told her in a letter that morning that there would be a ball late in the afternoon. She was invited, and so was Lord Jones. It would be very casual and relaxed compared to the dinner parties she had recently had with the Prince and Princess, and the focus would be much more on dancing and mingling. So there would be plenty of opportunities to meet with Lord Jones without drawing attention to herself.

The ball would be held at five o'clock. Which meant she had until then to while away. But she did not want to wait. She wanted the time to arrive immediately. She wanted to look her best and act her best to prove to him what a wonderful young woman she was. Not to mention, to makeup for what she had done with Prince Ferdinand...

Trying on her dress for the ball, Lucy looked at herself in the mirror. She thought she looked quite pleasing to the eye. No wonder Prince Ferdinand and Lord Jones could not keep to themselves. She had to remind herself again that she no longer looked girlish and cute. She was an adult woman, with the same sensual curves and plump lips which made her mother so desirable. Not to mention her own cravings for physical intimacy, which were no doubt causing her to move and talk more suggestively than she ought to.

She was sensual. She was sweet. She was stylish. She was stunning, and she knew it. She smirked at her own reflection. Her mother was right. She *would* marry the perfect man—at any cost.



Arriving at the ball, her confidence did not falter even as she walked into the bright lights and saw so many other young women, also looking resplendent. Because she was herself. She was beautiful in her own way. And Lord Jones had already said that he appreciated her more than he did others. He had said she was refreshing, unique. He liked her.

She spied him dancing with a young lady. For someone uninterested in marriage, he sure was happy to spend time with women. But he had already confessed that he would do anything for fun, and she believed him. After all, he had no reason to impress anyone, did he? He could just do whatever he pleased, live in the moment, and enjoy himself.

She watched closely, feeling a pang of jealousy as his hand rested on the woman's hip and he smiled down at her. But she reassured herself that his smile was not approving, or loving. It was friendly and warm, but nothing else.

As the dance drew to a close, she made sure to make eye contact with him. He smiled at her, bowed to his partner, and walked to where Lucy was waiting.

“I was wondering where you were,” he said with a grin. He looked so good. His suit was again impeccable, and perfectly tailored to his frame. The green in it accentuated his eyes. She spied a stray cat hair on his sleeve, but that somehow just added to it. A man who loved animals was a good man.

“I am not so late,” Lucy replied, trying to avoid blushing.

“Ah, but ordinarily you would be here long before me. It is odd to not see you here as soon as I arrive.” He made eye contact with her and she felt her heart thump hard in her chest. “You have missed two dances already. I had to make do.”

“I would love to dance,” she replied, her heart fluttering hard in her chest.

He extended his hand to her. “Then let us not waste another minute,” he replied.

She slipped her fingers into the palm of his hand. His hands were so much bigger, so much stronger than hers. It felt as though her hand was surrounded by a protective fortress. She followed as he guided her out, just in time for the first keystroke of the piano.

She remembered him saying she was a terrible dancer. And nevertheless, he had wanted to dance with her. He had missed her. Her heart beat harder and harder in her chest. She would be able to be with him. It was destined to be.

Andrew was anything but a terrible dancer. He stepped so gracefully, so wonderfully. Like a dressage horse, or a swan gliding over water. It was magical. She moved in a little closer, enjoying the feeling of being so close to him. All she wanted was to feel like this forever. And it could not happen. Not unless she could persuade him that marriage was a good idea. She sighed. It would be impossible to do that. He was so committed to avoiding marriage. But she had to at least try.

The dance drew to a close. She had wanted to dance the next one with him, to just stay like that. But she understood how frustrating it must be to such an excellent dancer every time she missed a step, or moved too fast or too slowly. He needed a break. So he wandered towards the champagne table.

Lucy followed Lord Jones to the side of the room. She immediately

noticed that they were right beside the door to the hallway. That would be perfect. Just like with Prince Ferdinand. Just like the last time she was left alone with Lord Jones. He would be emboldened by their privacy. He would lock lips with her, embrace her. And then, in that heated moment, she could point out his hypocrisy to him, prove to him that she was worthy of marriage. He would be forced to acknowledge her worthiness and then she would all but have him.

She made eye contact with him as she took her champagne flute, then nodded towards the door. He smiled, blushing slightly, and nodded in agreement, following her as she tried to inconspicuously make her way out of the door.

Out in the hallway, she felt her stomach knotted with excitement. This would be like with Prince Ferdinand. Only better. Because it was with Lord Jones. For a moment they stood there, like two children playing truant, unsure what it was they were going to do, but too stubborn to just go back indoors. Then, Lord Jones leaned in and kissed her softly.

It was the lightest, most fleeting kiss. His lips barely grazed hers. And yet she felt as though she would melt into a puddle. As their lips separated he just stood there, gazing down into her eyes, his own eyes full of love and tenderness. She smiled and pushed up onto her toes, locking lips with him again.

Perhaps she would get by without marriage after all. So long as she could have him, what did it matter if they got married or not? If he would agree to marry her, then all the better, of course. But if not, she was not prepared to marry anyone else, to belong to anyone else. It was wrong, but she would be willing to live in sin for this man.

She put her free hand behind his head, to hold him in the kiss, relishing the taste of champagne on his lips and the soft scent of his cologne, brought out by the exertion of dancing. He was delicious. And she would have him, whatever the cost.

He pulled away from her slightly. She wanted to lean right back in, but she remembered how it had felt when Prince Ferdinand had done that to her. She stepped back a little bit. “Are you alright?” she asked sweetly.

He nodded. “I suppose so...”

“Do you not want me to kiss you?” she asked.

“I am not sure of what I want,” Lord Jones replied. “I find you very attractive, but I am worried that you would attempt to coerce me into marriage.”

“I see. Even me?” she asked. She suddenly felt deeply guilty. She had wanted to coerce him into marriage. She had wanted to deceive him and manipulate him and persuade him it was a good idea. And she might have been caught out. “I have already committed to never marrying, you know this,” she insisted.

“I know, I know...” he replied. “But you are still a woman. And I cannot shake the feeling that, as a woman, you still desire to trap a man in wedlock.”

“Do you not think I would tell you if that was what I intended to do?” she asked.

He sighed and shook his head. “Women have lied to me about their intentions very much before,” he said. “I cannot be sure you would not do the same. If anything, from my past experiences you are probably lying right now.”

“I would never do such a thing!” Lucy exclaimed. She could feel the heat rising to her face. She had been caught out. Or had she? After all, she was willing to live in sin if he had rejected her. She would not have pushed him further than he would have wanted to go. Why was she feeling so defensive?

Because he had worked it out before she had told him. He had caught her and her intellect had been insulted. Lucy was not sure what made her more indignant, what he was accusing her of, that he had worked it out, or the fact that she had considered him worth the sin he was tempting her into.

Until then he had been so subtle with her, so careful and gentle with her. He had treated her like she was different, like she was special, like she meant something to him. Now he was just treating her like she was the same as any other woman, if not worse.

“If you are so committed to never marrying,” Lord Jones said. “Then explain to me what you were doing trying to seduce a Prince?”

“Prince Ferdinand is...” she said, looking at her feet as she trailed off. “My mother wants me to win him over. To court him.”

“And you told her you did not want to?” Lord Jones asked, fully knowing the answer.

Lucy sighed. “I have already told you. It is not so easy for a young woman as it is for a man. I have to play along, to grin and bear it.”

“You did not look as though you were simply enduring his company,” Lord Jones said quietly, a hint of bitterness in his voice. “You looked

as though you were positively savouring it."

Lucy felt the heat rising to her face again, in both anger and shame. So he *had* seen! And yet he had kept quiet, held it back until the right moment to cruelly spring it on her.

"I—I suppose that..." She sighed. "It is complicated. He is not an undesirable man. I did not intend for him to go so far, but, I suppose I trusted him too much. Which is not a mistake I will make again."

Lord Jones nodded. "No, I understand. And I do not blame you. It is not your fault, what happened then."

"So you understand me?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes, I do."

"And you trust me?" she added carefully.

He nodded without hesitating. "So far as I can trust anyone. I just wish it were all much simpler."

Lucy sighed heavily. "I do too."

All she wanted was to kiss and hold him. But that was not really an option, was it? He was scared of her, and she was still living with the feeling she was somehow soiled. She did not want to kiss him when he was pulling away from her, scared. It was just like when Prince Ferdinand had continued to force himself towards her. It was not right, or fair. And she did not want to act like that, to pass on that pain and suffering to Lord Jones, who she loved and respected.

Quietly, they rejoined the ball. There was nothing more to do. And she was not ready to dance with him again, nor he with her. So they parted ways, as she mulled over what had just happened.

She danced a little with a few different young men, much to her mother's delight. But her mind was on Lord Jones the whole time. Why had she not been able to tell him her true intentions? Why had she allowed herself to become defensive, to deny her own desire to marry him? She was so scared of his rejection, but how could he embrace her if she did not risk being rejected? It would be far worse to live a life of never knowing than to be turned down the once.

Lucy wanted him. And she would tell him. The worst he could do was reject her. The worse he could do was say 'no'. And then they would be in no worse position than they already were. She nodded to herself, determined. This was what she needed to do.

She walked up and down the room, looking everywhere for Lord

Jones. But he was nowhere to be found. He was not dancing, or drinking, or... anywhere. Lucy feared he may have already headed home. She needed to find out. If he was still there, she would seek him until she found him. And if he was home, she would visit him first thing in the morning.

She walked out into the hallway and began marching towards where the footman stood, watching the door, ensuring that guests had all their belongings with them when they left. He would know if Lord Jones had departed already.

But then she heard a muffled sound down a narrow hallway to the right. There was but a single candle illuminating it, and it looked bare, as though it were only ordinarily used by the servants. And yet there were two very well dressed young people down there, vaguely illuminated by the flickering flame. Lucy almost walked off in disgust, but then she realised who it was.

It was Andrew, leaning against a wall, with a young woman's body pressed against him. That blonde hair... Lucy knew who it was immediately. It was Clara.

She could almost feel her heart breaking in two.

Chapter 18

Lucy felt her breath speeding up and tears rising in her eyes. She could not bear to watch the scene a minute longer. It was infuriating. It was repulsive. It was wrong.

It was a betrayal.

She had thought that Lord Jones was no longer interested in Clara, and that was blatantly not the case. And she had thought that Clara meant it when she said that Edmund was all she wanted and needed in a man, and that was clearly a lie too. They desired one another with a fierce and burning passion.

And Lucy was not about to stand there and watch them.

Rejoining the party, she wondered what would happen when Lord Jones and Clara Neal finished handling one another and returned to the ball. Would Lord Jones just walk back up to her and ask her for another dance? Would he continue to hypocritically tell her off for kissing Prince Ferdinand? Would Clara tell her yet again about how satisfied she was with her fiancé, and how normal it was to desire other men?

If they did she would have to just stand there and nod and smile politely, all the while knowing what complete and utter hypocrites they were. She would have to not only put up with their lies, but also feed them and play along.

No, she needed to go home. It would be sheer torture to have to hold in all her emotions as they blatantly lied to her. She had been taken for a fool by both of them. She was not a woman as she had thought. She was just a foolish little girl playing in an adult world. And the adults knew how to run rings around her, how to hurt her. And they had. So she did what every little girl did when she was hurt by older children.

She began to seek her mother. Lady Fitzgerald was happily talking to several other nobles, laughing possibly a little too loudly, no doubt trying to persuade them of Lucy's suitability for marriage.

“Mother,” she said as she approached the group, “I would like to go home now.”

Her mother rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Now? The ball has barely just begun?”

“I do not feel very well,” Lucy replied.

“Then why didn't you tell me before we left? No, we are here now. And you must dance and socialize.” Lady Fitzgerald gave her daughter a warning glare. Lucy knew there was only one thing to it. She gently took her mother's arm and leaned in to whisper.

“I feel quite tired and faint,” she said softly, “I may have had too much to drink.”

Her mother's eyes grew wide in shock. “Are you certain?” she asked.

Lucy nodded. “I am sorry.” She understood her mother's reaction. There was nothing worse than a young woman who had been drinking to excess, and it was not as though Lucy could continue to turn down drinks for the rest of the night. If she had already had too much, she needed to get home before she could do anything improper.

But this was what she was counting on. Lucy knew what she was doing. The concern her daughter had drunk too much was enough to send Lady Fitzgerald into a frenzy of apologies, farewells, and curtsies before they set off to ask for their coach.

It was so hurried that the other nobles became concerned that Lucy was seriously ill, and began asking after her. And, of course, to prevent her daughter from admitting the truth, Lady Fitzgerald redoubled her efforts at apologizing and making her way to the door.

It took a little longer than Lucy would have liked, but nevertheless they were going to leave early. Which was perfect. That way she would not have to face Lord Jones. She followed her mother to the front door, trying to look as small as possible, avoiding so much as glancing down that little hallway, for fear they were still there.

She heard the door to the Great Hall creaking open as they waited for their coats.

Looking back over her shoulder, she spied Lord Jones rejoining the party. He stood in the doorway, the bright lights shining harsh against him, casting a shadow back into the hall. He was looking up and down the room from the door, clearly seeking her. Well, he would not find her. She would be long gone by the time he realised she was not in there.

As a servant brought her coat and bonnet, she spied Lord Jones walking into the room and the great door swinging shut behind him. A few moments later, Lucy and her mother were in their coach, on the way home. And Lord Jones was none the wiser.

Lucy stared out of the window, watching the rain which was just beginning to fall.

“Are you well?” her mother asked.

She shook her head slowly, but did not look away from the window. “I am feeling very nauseous, and very tired,” she replied. Which was not a lie at all. She was feeling nauseous and exhausted. Just not from drinking.

“I hope you have not picked up anything at the ball,” her mother continued, “I bet the salmon mousse was going sour. Do you feel any cramping in your stomach? A fever coming on?”

Lucy just sighed. “I did not have any salmon. I swear, mother, it is just the drink.”

Lady Fitzgerald nodded reluctantly. As a mother all she wanted was to help her daughter, to make her feel better again. But she could not. Even if she knew what was troubling Lucy, she could not help her.

Lord Jones was not interested in her, or in marriage. He might have seemed sweet and friendly to her, but at the end she was just deceiving herself. She had wanted him to be a nice man. She had wanted him to be gentle and shy and innocent. She had wanted him to be like her. So she had assumed that his bravado was all an act. She had seen signs of sweetness where there were none. She had lied to herself. And now she was paying the price.

He was not pretending to be bold or rude. That was who he truly was at his core. That was his true nature. And there was nothing she could do to change him.

Getting home, all she wanted to do was collapse in bed and go to sleep. The lie about drinking too much was a perfect cover for this too. Her mother made sure she was properly undressed, got a servant to bring her some tea, and left her in her room with the lights off, to get some proper rest.

Lucy could barely sleep that night. The image of what she had seen was burned into her mind for good. She could not believe it. After all his big words about not trusting Clara. After all he had said about feeling betrayed and rejected. After getting angry at Lucy and saying

he could not trust her because she kissed Prince Ferdinand.

And he had gone and done that. It was ridiculous. It was repulsive. She needed to hate him.

And she could not. She still wanted him to like her, to notice her, to care about her. She still heard this little voice in the back of her mind telling her that she was right the first time, that he really was a good, sweet gentleman.

Telling the voice to shut up, she rolled over in her bed and tried to get to sleep.



Lucy awoke the next morning feeling absolutely dreadful. She could not bear the thought of facing the day. What was the point, after all? She could not be with Lord Jones, and she could not be with anyone else. She had deceived herself that a perfect man existed again. And, yet again, she had been proven wrong. There was no perfect man. Anyone who looked perfect was just a liar and a hypocrite.

Eventually she started to feel a little silly for lying in bed, feeling sorry for herself, and missing breakfast. She could do with getting up and carrying on as normal. Why should Lord Jones have the satisfaction of messing with her head, after all? No, she would be fine without him.

Downstairs, her mother seemed relieved to see her. “Finally!” Lady Fitzgerald exclaimed. “I was so worried about you. When you did not come downstairs, I thought you had most definitely eaten something bad.”

Lucy shook her head. “Like I said, it was just the champagne. It was more than I thought. I am actually still feeling a little light-headed,” she remarked.

“But we have another suitor for you to meet,” her mother said in frustration. “After all you said about wanting to get married, I thought you would make more of an effort.”

“I am making as much of an effort as I can,” Lucy replied, “but you know that I never feel well after drinking, and I was foolish enough to have too much last night.”

Lady Fitzgerald shook her head. “Are you certain that you cannot at least try? Percival is such a lovely young man, I would hate to disappoint him.”

All Lucy really wanted to do was go back upstairs. But that would mean that Lord Jones and the men like him were winning. They had successfully put her off men. She thought it over. Her mother was right. The only way to find the right man was to court more men.

Perhaps her problems with men were just the type of man, that was all. She was picking men who were already in love with someone else. But not every man had to be in love with someone. Some men were probably waiting for the right woman to marry. And she could meet them, and maybe there would be love then too.

Since coming to terms with her affections for Duke Perry, Lucy had been forced to accept that she was able to feel something for more than one man. Which meant that, just as she had felt some attraction towards Prince Ferdinand and Lord Jones, there must be other men she was able to be attracted to. Men who would reciprocate.

Besides, if Lord Jones was still obsessed with Clara, then he could not be the right man, could he?

“Very well,” she said, “I shall get dressed properly in time to see this... Percy?”

Her mother nodded. “Yes, Percival, Percy. He will be here for lunch, so you have a few hours in which to prepare yourself. He is very sweet, very lovely. I am sure you will get along with him.”

Lucy smiled and nodded. She had to make the effort. After all, what if Percival was another man she could love? And what if he loved her back? Then all her problems would be solved. She could not ruin her own life just because a few men were less than courteous to her. She just had to move on.

And yet, there was still the very real possibility that she would never marry. There was still the possibility that Lord Jones was truly the one for her. Or Duke Perry. Or even Prince Ferdinand. And she had been rejected by them, unwanted except for her body. Just as she had rejected so many suitors before.

Suddenly mortified, Lucy realised that she had never got to know most of her suitors before beginning to reject them. She had done everything in her power to insult them, push them away. What if one of them had been her true love? What if one of them was perfectly lovable, and perfectly capable of loving her? They would never give her a second chance. She would never know.

For two years she had been ruining her own life, all because of one man who broke her heart.

And now it was possible she would never again meet a man who inspired such passions in her.

She just wanted to cry, but what good would that do?

No, she had to carry on. She had already come to terms with the possibility of remaining a spinster. So now she had nothing to lose. Either she met a man she could love and who would love her, or nothing changed and she remained unwed forever.

But she was going to at least make a serious effort. Lucy made a point of looking her very best. She could barely find the motivation to dress properly, and she had to tell herself that it was for Lord Jones just to persuade herself to make the effort. She felt somewhat ashamed that it was only by pretending to dress up for the man she was still obsessed with that she could make herself look beautiful.

She didn't know if Percival would be worth the effort. She did not know he *wouldn't* be worth the effort, but it was quite hard to get excited about something so unknown.

Heading downstairs, she wondered whether she had dressed up well enough. She was much better dressed than she had been for a long time, but she still felt it fell short of what she wanted to look like for Lord Jones. And that was the standard. She wanted to look as good as she would make herself look for him. She wanted to impress her suitors as much as she had impressed him. She wanted to move on.

She could hear voices coming from the drawing room. Her mother, another woman, and a man.

Walking into the drawing room, she saw her mother talking to a tall, thin, red-headed man, about her age. He looked quite calm, which was unusual in such a young suitor, and he was already smiling warmly, which reassured her. She curtsied and he bowed in return.

The other woman, with bright red hair tied back tightly and a fairly sombre dress, smiled a little and curtsied too. She curtsied back.

“Lucy, this is Lord Percy Sharpe and his mother,” her mother said.

The woman's dark clothes and bare appearance suddenly made sense to Lucy. If this young man was a Lord, then he had inherited his father's title. Which meant his father was deceased and his mother had allowed the title to pass right down to him, rather than fight to retain it. The dark clothes and withdrawn appearance were because they were both in mourning. Lucy wondered whether this was really the right time for him to be courting her, considering his situation.

But she could not make life choices for anyone else. She followed Lord Sharpe to the seat by the window, as their mothers made their way to the other side of the room, where they could see but not hear.

She was not exactly impressed by Percival. There was nothing wrong with him, of course. He was a perfectly charming young man. But she felt nothing at all for him. He was just bland, simple, quiet... and of course he was. After all, he was only just recovering from the loss of his father. Could she really judge him so soon? Perhaps he was a much more lively, outgoing, cheerful person ordinarily. But it didn't feel like

it would make any odds if he was.

She knew who she was attracted to, and it was not him. Even making an effort not to actively push him away, she felt no desire to please or impress him. He was just there, the same way the chair, or the grandfather clock, or the painting on the mantelpiece were. He was another part of the scenery. How could he ever replace someone who made the passions in her heart rise like waves on a stormy sea? How could he ever be her perfect man?

No, she would know when she met her perfect man. She would know immediately. And Lord Sharpe was a pleasant young man, but he was not her perfect man. She was wasting both their time by continuing the farce.

Lucy stood up and shook her head, “I am afraid I shall have to retire for now.”

“How come?” he asked. “Is it something I said?”

“You have not said anything at all,” Lucy replied. She could see her mother giving her a cold look from across the room. But what else could she do? Continue to waste this young man's time?

“Is it because I did not say anything?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No. It is not about what you have or have not done. It is about myself.”

“Are you well?” he asked, sounding genuinely concerned for her.

Lucy sighed and shook her head. “Not very well, but I suppose I shall be fine. Just... do not concern yourself about it.”

And she left the room. She knew her mother would be angry. She knew she would be told off heartily and made to feel ashamed for walking out like that. But it was better that way. She sat and braced herself for the impending storm.

Lucy was a little surprised when her mother walked into the bedroom quietly, looking a little concerned. “How are you?” she asked softly.

Lucy shook her head. “I am afraid I am still feeling a little unwell from last night. I could not stay,” she insisted.

“You do not need to lie to me,” Lady Fitzgerald replied. “What is really the matter? Are you having some trouble forgetting someone again?”

Lucy sighed and nodded. “I am.”

Her mother hugged her. “I understand, Lucy. But... you need to seize opportunities as they arise. I am not sure Prince Ferdinand is all that interested in you.”

Prince Ferdinand? Lucy had to contain her shock. How could her mother be so wise and yet so blind at once? Did she really think all of this was because Lucy could not marry a prince? Perhaps a few years ago she would have been this disheartened by Prince Ferdinand's attitude towards her, but now she was just insulted and scared.

Still, it was better than her mother knowing what was actually happening. “I know. It is just difficult to go on when you miss someone,” she said.

Her mother nodded. “I understand. I suppose it is also the doubt, knowing you may yet have a chance, which hurts.”

Lucy nodded back. How could her mother be so right and so wrong at once? Yes, it was the doubt that hurt the most.

“We have received an invitation to dinner with Her Majesty Elisaveta,” Lady Fitzgerald mused. “Perhaps he will be there then.”

“I am not sure I could...” Lucy began, before making eye contact with her mother and stopping mid-sentence.

“You can and you must,” her mother insisted. “If only to find out what he actually thinks of you. It will make you feel better to talk about it, even if he ends up rejecting you.”

Lucy contemplated spending an evening at a dinner party with the Prince again. Making eye contact with him over the table. Talking to him. Seeing him vanish into an empty room with another wide-eyed, hopeful young woman.

She could feel her blood running cold. But what could she tell her mother? She smiled and nodded. “Yes, that sounds like a very good idea. I do not know what I would do without you.”

Lady Fitzgerald beamed. “No need to thank me. Now, I must write back to the Princess immediately and ensure that she knows you will be attending tomorrow. And that you look forward to seeing her brother.” Lady Fitzgerald gave Lucy a knowing smile before sauntering out the room.

Lucy fell back onto her bed with a heavy sigh. Now there was yet another problem. Why couldn't everything be as simple as it had been when she was younger, at boarding school? She could not possibly continue to juggle all these relationships, all these arrangements and

engagements, all these people. It would be a blessing to be able to return to a time when she could just talk to her friends and study and pray.

But that life was behind her now. Now she had to look to the future instead. A future where Prince Ferdinand knew she was looking forward to seeing him, apparently. Where she would talk to him and entertain him. Where she would have to live with the shame of knowing what he had tried to do with her, what sort of a woman he thought she was.

Lucy braced herself for the worst.



The dinner party was as beautifully planned as always. As she walked in, a few hours early so she could greet the Princess, Lucy could see the decorations going up, and could smell the delightful aromas rising from the kitchens. She was pretty confident she had not experienced that sort of understated extravagance before in her life. Other than the Prince and Princess, nobody had the same tastes, the same skills, or the same wealth.

She was taken to the Great Hall, where Her Majesty was overseeing the servants hanging garlands of flowers and ivy, and listening to a chef's aide explain what would be served over dinner.

“Your Majesty, Lucy Fitzgerald, daughter of Baron Fitzgerald, is here,” the footman said.

Princess Elisaveta turned around and Lucy curtsied, bowing her head low. A friend or not, Princess Elisaveta was still royalty, and the sort of royalty whose charisma alone made it worth the effort of bowing down before her. She was everything Lucy had expected a princess to be and more.

“I am so glad you could make it,” Princess Elisaveta said, smiling earnestly and taking Lucy's hand. “We shall have such a wonderful evening.”

Lucy nodded. “I am glad I could make it too, Your Highness, and may I say everything is looking fantastic.”

Princess Elisaveta laughed softly in delight. “I am pleased that you like it. All I wish is for my guests to be happy. Speaking of which... did your mother not mention you wanted to see my brother?”

Lucy found herself blushing and a faint perspiration rose on the back of her neck. “Oh, that is just my mother being... herself, Your Majesty.”

Her Majesty cast Lucy a knowing smile. “Do not be modest, I can see you blush.”

Lucy shook her head, but could not speak before the Princess carried on.

“My brother is somewhere around here,” she said, this time with a slightly frustrated tone. “I shall go and find him. Wait here.”

Lucy wanted to tell her not to bother, to stay. She wanted to say that she only wished to talk to her friend, and did not care at all for rude, licentious Prince Ferdinand. But she did not. She remained frozen and waited as Princess Elisaveta marched off. Even though she was a princess, Lucy could detect in her steps the slight stomp of a girl angry at her brother.

The last thing she wanted was to see Prince Ferdinand, but she could not exactly contradict a princess. If Her Highness wanted to go and find His Majesty so that he and Lucy could talk, then that was what was going to happen. At least Princess Elisaveta would be present to make sure he did not do anything too outrageous.

She heard a voice in the hallway echoing “Elisaveta?” She knew who it was immediately. Only one person would address the Princess like that.

And then she saw him. Prince Ferdinand walked right in through the door where Princess Elisaveta had left from and looked around the room. At first, he looked over her like she was a chair. But then his eyes landed on her. He looked a little startled as he stared at her, like he had just seen a ghost.

Lucy froze on the spot. “Hello, Your Highness,” she said nervously. “I trust that Your Highness is well?”

He nodded. “Yes, yes I am. I trust that you are well too, young lady.”

Lucy nodded. “I am very well, Your Highness,” she replied.

“Even after...” he began, raising an eyebrow. “You can be honest with me. You look completely and utterly petrified.”

Lucy blushed and looked aside. “To be perfectly honest, Your Highness, with Your Highness's permission... I am somewhat afraid of you, yes.”

She glanced up just in time to see Ferdinand smile. He still looked very handsome. Very devilish. “I did not mean you any harm, I simply... I am used to women being a certain way around me.”

She nodded. “And I understand that, Your Highness, I did not intend to make Your Highness believe I was pursuing something which I was not, and for that I apologize.”

Prince Ferdinand's smile vanished and he shook his head energetically. “No, no, no. Do not apologize to me. It was I who insulted your virtue. I should not have been so quick to assume your nature or your intentions. I dare say I have hurt you.”

“Not at all, Your Highness,” Lucy reassured him. “I was a bit startled, nothing more.”

“No, no, you are a woman of taste, and class, and I understand that. But I insulted you and I must rectify it.” He was pacing up and down a little, but for some reason he did not appear nervous. He simply exuded sheer energy. It was somewhat terrifying. “Give me a little time, and I shall think of something to compensate you the suffering I have brought upon you...”

Lucy wanted to tell him again not to worry, but, as with his sister, she was not exactly sure how to refuse a Prince. Was there any proper way of telling a member of royalty that he was wrong? That he was doing too much?

“I have it,” he finally said, “I know just what to do. A friend of mine is the Earl of Clanricarde, in Ireland. He is visiting for this party, and looking for a wife. I believe you would be a wonderful fit for him. So I shall introduce you.”

“Oh, Your Highness does not need to go so far!” Lucy replied.

“What is the matter? Are you already engaged to be married? Do you have a serious suitor?” Prince Ferdinand asked.

Lucy shook her head. “No, your Majesty, but I... I am not sure I would be suitable for an Earl.”

“You will. You are a stunning beauty, and my sister says you are a strong young woman with a good heart. You are very much worthy,” Prince Ferdinand insisted.

She shuffled her feet, not at all sure what to make of what was happening.

“You will love him, trust me. And he is much more of the gentle,

loving variety," His Highness explained. "Not so much like I am," he explained. "If you understand what I mean by that."

Lucy nodded and smiled. She understood. Although he was a friend of Prince Ferdinand's, the Earl of Clanricarde was not a lustful man who would spend the hours after dinner locked in a room with an unmarried young woman. Rather, he was a respectable man, who was most likely waiting for the perfect woman to be his wife.

Lucy was not sure she was ready for this. But how could she turn it down? An Earl on a silver platter? This was exactly the sort of opportunity her mother talked to her about. She may not be the right woman to tame down Prince Ferdinand and make him into a husband, but she was absolutely prepared to marry a good man who was already contemplating marriage. And she was dressed beautifully, ready to impress anyone suitable.

She nodded. "Very well, Your Highness, I will accept Your Highness's most gracious offer, and I shall meet with the Earl of Clanricarde, so that he may decide whether I would make a suitable wife for him. Thank you very much."

Prince Ferdinand looked overjoyed by her decision. "Not at all," he replied. "Thank you for allowing me to compensate my atrocious behaviour when we last met."

And with that, he swiftly made his way out of the room, with a slight skip in his step, apparently ecstatic that he had been allowed to put the world to rights.

Just as he left, he passed Princess Elisaveta in the doorway.

"Brother!" she exclaimed. "I have been looking for you everywhere." Her eyes landed on Lucy.

Lucy shook her head and smiled.

Understandingly, Princess Elisaveta smiled back and nodded. "You are not even dressed for dinner," she scolded her brother as he left the room.

Chapter 20

Lucy was not unimpressed when she was introduced to the Earl of Clanricarde before dinner. He was a bit older than she had expected, at least a whole decade older than her, if not two whole decades. But he wore it well, was not particularly marked by the years which had passed him, and possessed a certain smoothness that comes with age.

Sitting beside him she realised that the evening would be a pleasant one whether or not he was interested in her, or she in him. Had Lucy ever been asked what sort of a slightly older man she would consider marrying, she would have probably described the Earl: late thirties to mid-forties, not many signs of ageing, calm and collected, polite and gentle.

He was, indeed, a very handsome man. He was not the tallest man she had met, but he was a good three inches taller than her, and his frame was otherwise perfectly proportioned. He had a strong jaw and nose, and sparkling blue eyes which shone like sapphires. His chestnut brown hair showed a few silver streaks, though it was hard to tell if it was from premature ageing or if he was older than he initially appeared. But he was the perfect balance of mature and youthful.

And, quite importantly, he did not have any of the aura of intimidating power which surrounded Prince Ferdinand. It was a relief to her, as she found Prince Ferdinand, however handsome he was, to be incredibly overbearing and exhausting to talk to for more than a few minutes at a time.

She found it difficult to keep up with his manic pace. The Earl, on the other hand, was fairly neutral, a peaceful presence who neither revitalized nor tired her.

He also had a wonderfully melodic accent and a certain wit and charm about him. She knew from experience that not all Irishmen had this smoothness, this class. This was purely from maturity, education, and a natural sensibility for others' moods and mind sets. It was as though he could see where you were emotionally and adapt to make sure you were always comfortable. And between this and his smooth accent, he

was a genuine pleasure to listen to. She could listen to him talk all night, happily.

All this really counted in his favour. Prince Ferdinand was not wrong when he had said that the Earl was a fantastic marriage prospect.

There was a slight problem: She felt no instinctive pull towards him. He was more like a friend of the family than someone she wanted to touch and hold like she wanted to touch and hold Lord Jones. But she did not feel the urge to push him aside either. It was a difficult choice. But she knew that if she gave him time she might grow to like him. And if she did not grow to like him, he did not seem the sort to be bitter about it. He would be worth the effort.

“How come is it that a fine, educated man of your age is not yet married?” Lucy asked.

The Earl sipped his wine and thought it over. “I would like to be. But I am careful. Like when I was buying my summer house. Just because I had enough money to buy whatever I liked did not mean I was about to just buy anything. I waited for years for the house I truly desired to come up for sale.”

Lucy nodded. “I understand that. Not being able to have quite what you desire.”

“Do you now?” he asked. “I would have thought you are too young to have experienced the torment and patience of deprivation.”

“Perhaps I am too young, perhaps I am wrong, but it just feels as though everything I actually want always... belongs to someone else,” Lucy said quietly.

“That happens a lot at your age,” the Earl replied. “It is rare to get what you desire at your first attempt.”

“How long does one have to wait to be able to get what they truly desire, then?” Lucy asked.

“You are asking the wrong man,” the Ear said. “I am not married either.”

Lucy shook her head. “But in general. You have waited for the things you want, how long does it take to get what you want?”

He laughed a little. “It depends on what you are looking for, and on your luck. In terms of that house, I waited four years. In terms of a wife, I have been searching for some time,” he said, “but I suppose I am a picky man. I will search for what I want the most, until I have

what is just right for me. Patience is a virtue, don't you know?"

"Do you ever... give up?" Lucy asked.

He shrugged. "I would not call it giving up, but there have been times when I realised the thing I was waiting for would not wait for me. I had to ask myself whether I truly wanted to chase it, or whether it was time to let it go."

"I suppose I need to do some soul-searching too," Lucy confessed. "I have been seeing many potential suitors and yet none have been quite right for me."

"A girl like you must have many suitors, but I cannot believe that they are all so terribly inappropriate. If enough men propose to you, one will eventually suit you," he replied.

Lucy sipped her wine thoughtfully. "You may be right, but... I cannot pick which one I want."

"What's wrong with the lads, then?" the Earl asked.

"One is married," she began.

"Ah, that's a no," he agreed.

"Many of the others are too naïve," she said.

"But they can grow," he countered.

"A few of them are just... uninteresting, or two-faced," she said.

"If you are certain of your judgement, lassie," he said.

"And one..." she carried on, suddenly pausing.

"One is the one you truly want," the Earl said, having waited a few seconds for her to finish.

She shook her head. "He is still obsessed with this woman he once courted. Probably engaging in some... indecent activities with her also," she added in a whisper.

The Earl nodded. "So... if you had to narrow them down to two, which two would you see?"

"I... I do not know," Lucy said. "It is hard to choose. Especially so suddenly."

The Earl put his head to one side. "How come are you so indecisive?"

Lucy wanted to reply. She wanted to say she was not indecisive, it was

just that her suitors made her life hard. But she could not. Because he was right. She was continually flip-flopping back and forth. One minute she did not want to marry, the next she was feeling swept up in a whirlwind of romance. One moment she was chasing a man, the next she was running from him. First, she was open and honest, then she was scared to tell the truth. She was as indecisive as they came.

The problem was not the men. There was nothing wrong with any of them. The problem was... her.

“I do not know why I am like this,” she said with a frustrated sigh. “It seems as though nothing ever works out the way I intend it to.”

The Earl nodded. “So, what is your intended result?”

“I beg your pardon?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“When you see a potential suitor, what is it you want from him? What requirements must he meet in order to satisfy you?” the Earl elaborated.

Lucy had never really thought of it this way. What *did* she want from a man? Or, indeed, from life? She shook her head. “I do not know.”

“Then there is your problem. You don't know what you want from them. And if you don't know what you want them to do, or say, or be, how are *they* supposed to know what to do, or say, or be like to please you? They're people, not circus animals.” The Earl's words were harsh like knives, but the soft, fatherly way in which he spoke them reassured Lucy.

“You are right,” she admitted. “I cannot ask someone to give me what I want when I do not even know what it is myself. But... how can I work out what I want, and how to get it?”

“One cannot move towards an objective if one does not first set the objective,” the Earl explained. “What is it your heart truly desires? In ten years, where would you like to see yourself?”

“I suppose in a nice house, with a few children but not too many, doing some charitable work, and living in peace and quiet,” Lucy replied.

The Earl nodded. “Then you are not concerned by status, or attending events?”

“I suppose not,” she admitted. “If anything, they make me anxious. I only wish to have a loving husband, a family, and a peaceful life.”

“Then that is a good first step to take. You want a man who wants

children and who does not like these big social events... like this one," the Earl said.

Lucy smiled and nodded. "I suppose you are right."

"And what else do you want?" he asked her. "What do you want him to look like? To believe in? To do for a living? To make per year?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. At all."

"There has to be something," the Earl replied. "Blonde or brown hair? Or black?"

Lucy shook her head again. "I could not care less."

"How much money do you spend per year?" he asked.

She shook her head once again, feeling a little frustrated. "I do not know."

"How can you expect to find the right man when you do not know what makes a man right?" The Earl chuckled and sipped his wine.

"I wish someone could tell me what makes a man right," she complained.

He choked back a laugh, coughing on his wine. "Lucy... Nobody can do that but you. If you keep asking other people to make your life choices for you, eventually you will have no choices left and wind up with whatever other people like."

"How did you decide what you want in a wife?" Lucy asked. Perhaps knowing *how* to work it out would make the process easier at least.

The Earl sipped a little more wine to soothe his throat. "I just thought about it. Asked myself what sort of a woman I could tolerate for several decades, in sickness and in health."

"Am I that sort of woman?" Lucy asked.

"I am afraid you are a little young for me," he said, "not in the body, but in the heart."

"What does that mean?" she asked, feeling a little indignant.

He shook his head. "It means that you do not know what you want, so you cannot know if I am right for you. How am I supposed to fall in love with a woman who does not even know me?"

"I see..." she replied. "Do you think I would be a woman someone could tolerate in marriage?"

“I am sure that many men would relish your company. When you are ready,” he replied.

Lucy understood him perfectly. She nodded and smiled. “I suppose I might be a bit too young for myself yet.”



As the party drew to a close, Lucy felt a sort of resolve she had never felt before. Like she had been given a treasure map. If she just worked out what it was she wanted, she would no longer be so indecisive, so scared. She was so determined to get home and start soul searching, that she almost ran straight into the Prince.

“I am so sorry, Your Highness!” she exclaimed, curtsying and bowing her head very low.

“Never mind that. Did it go well with the Earl?” Prince Ferdinand asked, raising an eyebrow in curiosity and smirking.

Lucy shook her head and smiled sweetly. “Not at all, Your Majesty. I am sorry to say I do not believe he is a good fit for me at all. And he agrees that I am not a good fit for him. Although we both very much appreciate how considerate Your Highness was in pairing us up.”

“But... why are you so happy if it did not go well with him?” Prince Ferdinand asked. He had a look on his face as though someone had just told him that wine came from the udders of grape-fed cows.

“Because I know what I am to do with my life, Your Highness,” she replied.

“I see...” His Majesty said, looking at once happy for her, and completely baffled.

Lucy did not care. She made her excuses and, with a spring in her step, set off to find her coach.

She had been following everyone else's lead. When she thought she was rebelling she was just being contrary. When she thought she was being good she was just complying. Of course she had had such a hard time working out what to do!

She needed to stop worrying about what other people were thinking and doing, and pay more attention to herself. And she knew just where to start disconnecting from the plans of others.

She stepped into the front room where her parents were reading

together and coughed lightly to get their attention. “Mother, Father, I have decided I shall stop courting a while.”

Her mother gave her the same stare which Prince Ferdinand had given her after the dinner party. “Why would you ever do such a thing as that?” she eventually asked.

There was no going back now. She just needed to let them know, and make sure it was over and done with. “I cannot marry any man just because of who he is,” Lucy said. “That is all I needed to say.”

Her mother shook her head in disbelief. “Lucy, you need to hurry up and choose a man to marry, if you do not, you will be old before you know it.”

“But how can I choose a man to marry if I am not sure what I want from a man?” she asked.

“There are plenty of men worth marrying, if only you'd pay attention,” Lady Fitzgerald said, exasperated.

Lucy shrugged. “I do not know yet what makes a man worth marrying. I suppose that is the first thing I need to discover.”

This was almost certainly the smartest thing she had done in a long time. A little soul-searching would do her a world of good. She knew her parents would be angry. But she didn't care anymore. For so long she had lived in fear of being judged and being punished. So much so that every time someone made a suggestion she was leaping to try it out. Even now, even this, was a little impulsive.

But it was different this time. The suggestion to discover what she truly wanted from life would be the last time she rushed to do what someone else told her to. After this, she would make sure she had a life plan, and check any suggestions against her own goals and interests.

The Earl had been correct. She did not care about status or connections, so her parents' main concerns were no longer of consequence to her. She had spent years of her life courting whichever men her parents presented her with, never offering any critique, taking for granted that she ought to be courted by men of power and prestige.

But she did not need them to be. She did not need a man to have so many connections, or a title equal or superior to her own. She had grown up in a boarding school, without going to parties or balls most of her life. And now she was attending them, they were almost a chore. She did not need or want to do this every day for the rest of her life.

As for wealth, she wanted a bit of money, enough to make her comfortable. She had no intention of taking up work like a peasant, but she did not *need* the sort of luxury which Princess Elisaveta enjoyed either. She had seen the lives of servants and the lives of royalty, and she would be quite content to live anywhere in the very middle of that.

She did not need an enormous house, and she already owned many dresses, shoes, and jewels, so she would not need a new wardrobe every few months either. After all, she had only owned four changes

of clothes at boarding school: day wear, evening wear, a nightie, and a Sunday dress. She could go the rest of her life without a hundred dresses.

Of course it would be nice for her husband to have some connections, some status, and some wealth. But she did not *need* any of it. Those were things her parents wanted for her, not things she wanted for herself.

She wanted children. Very many children. To hear the patter of tiny feet for years and years. To sing to them and cradle them. The boarding school had a nursery attached to it, and she had spent very many hours watching the nannies and sisters tending for the little babies, wanting so badly to hold one of her very own.

It would be nice to adopt some as well, to improve the lives of those less fortunate. Although boarding school had been a little simple compared to the lives of her friends, she had never gone without good food or something nice to wear, or something to play with. She had been blessed with a good life and, depending on how blessed her husband was, she would like to share her life with those who would otherwise do without.

Yes, that made sense to her. She did not really care about anything at all, as long as her home would always be filled with happy, healthy children.

Lucy wrote down her requirements as she thought of them. This would help her to narrow things down, especially when faced with a suitor she was not certain of, or a life-altering decision she was unconvinced about. At the end, she realised that her only requirements were to lead a peaceful life away from most other people, to have many children, and to use whatever she could to help those less fortunate than herself. Her perfect husband would help guide her towards those goals. No, the perfect husband would share those goals, so that they could support one another in pursuing them.

Looking at the list, she noticed the problem immediately. She wanted a man who was gentle with her, yet strong to the world. Who was caring and loving and who sacrificed his own well-being for the less fortunate. Who was disinterested in social mores. Who was perhaps a little more adventurous than the average man. She wanted Lord Jones.

Great.

She had come full circle again.

She once again read through her list of life goals, and then her list of

requirements in a husband, hoping to find something she could compromise some more on, or another requirement she could add that would disqualify Lord Jones. But she found nothing. Everything she wanted, he possessed. And everything he did not possess, she was willing to compromise on.

He was her perfect man. He had been all along. That little voice in the back of her head was right.

But Lord Jones was out of the question. So... would another man ever meet these requirements? Probably not. None of the other men she had met were anywhere close to her perfect husband. At least... at least the ones she had given a chance were nothing close. She could not speak for the dozens of men who she had bullied into leaving.

Lucy scrunched up her lists and threw them into the corner of the room, where she would no longer have to look at them. They just reminded her of the futility of her pursuit. No matter what she did, what she tried, where she went, it always seemed to come back to Lord Jones. The impossible, fascinating, marvellous Baron Andrew Jones.

She had thought she would solve her problem by working out what her heart truly desired, but this was just making it worse. She could lie to herself. She could run from it. She could try and court other men. She could try and change her requirements. But at the end of the day, she would always desire Lord Jones, and only Lord Jones.

Nobody else could replace him in her heart.

She heard a knock at the door, which made her realize she had been crying, her tears leaving two dirty streams of mixed makeup running down her cheeks. She took a handkerchief and wiped the smears away, taking most of her remaining makeup with it.

She looked awful. But at least it wasn't *too* obvious she had been crying. “Come in,” she said, trying to make her voice sound steady and bold, rather than shaky and whimpering.

The door gently creaked open. Footsteps sounded on the wooden floor. The door creaked shut again. She looked over her shoulder to see her guest. It was her mother. “My dear, your father and I are worried about you,” Lady Fitzgerald began.

Lucy nodded. “I understand,” she replied.

“I do not think that you do,” Lady Fitzgerald said. “We have been trying very hard for the past two years to get you to take your

marriage seriously, to court good men and to find one who would make an ideal husband for you. We even considered arranging the whole affair ourselves but... the last thing we want is for your worst fear to come true, and for you to end up in an unhappy marriage. But we are at our wits' end."

Lucy nodded and listened earnestly. "But... if there are no appropriate men for me, then what ought I to do?"

"Tell me, Lucy, what do you want in a man?" her mother asked.

Lucy shook her head. "I suppose what I want in a man is too much to ask of any man," she replied.

"And what do you think of marriage?" her mother continued.

Lucy hesitated.

"You can tell me. I am your mother," Lady Fitzgerald said.

"I do not think highly of marriage. It seems as though everyone I would like to marry does not desire me, and everyone who desires me I would not like to marry," she confessed.

Her mother nodded in understanding, then sighed wearily. "I am not sure you will ever encounter a man who suits you. Nor am I sure that marriage is the right choice for you." Lucy could hear a pained tone in Lady Fitzgerald's voice as she spoke. "But there are other paths for women who do not wish to marry. Respectable paths. We were wondering if you would like to consider joining a convent," her mother said quietly.

Lucy was a little taken aback. "Are you sure that is not a bit of an extreme answer?" she asked. "There are many women who are spinsters who live very happily."

"But not safely," her mother replied. "I think we did you more harm than good by sending you to boarding school. We may have left you unable to care for yourself properly. But you are unwilling to marry, so you will never have a husband to support you, or children to look after you in old age. At a convent there would be some solidarity. You would be able to lead a Godly life, to make a good impression on the world, and to live with the support of your sisters."

At first Lucy was deeply insulted by the suggestion. But as she mulled it over, it began to make sense to her. She had grown up in an environment surrounded by a supportive group of other girls. And she was in a situation where, from her own perspective, it seemed as though she would never marry. She could offer her mother no counter

argument.

“I suppose... I shall consider it,” she finally said. “Perhaps that is what I am destined to do,” she added with a smile.

Lady Fitzgerald pursed her lips. “You are not angry that I would suggest that?”

Lucy nodded. “I am somewhat angry. But I also agree with you. Whatever I do, I am always ending up back where I started. Perhaps the sort of life I led at boarding school would be better suited to me.”

Her mother seemed at once exhausted and relieved. “It would not have been my first choice for my dear daughter,” she confessed, “but at least it is a good choice.”

Lucy embraced her mother closely. “I am glad that you would consider every option for me, even if it is not one you would prefer,” she confessed. “And I am happy that you and father are so patient and kind towards me.”

Lady Fitzgerald nodded and hugged her daughter back. After a few moments embracing, Lucy pulled back. She spied a single tear resting on her mother's cheek. It hurt her deep down to see that her mother was on the verge of weeping. But she also knew that if she agreed to this, she would spare her mother any future pain.

“I would like to go in the garden, to clear my mind,” she said.

“It is getting dark already,” her mother replied.

Lucy nodded. “I shall be back in before the sun is down,” she said.

Wrapped in a shawl, a coat, and a bonnet, the wind whipping her hair sharply, Lucy walked down the garden, looking at the roses which were finally dying off. The season was coming to an end. It was over two years now since Duke Perry had rejected her. Over two and a half. Time was flying by. And yet in two and a half years, nothing had changed. Nothing had improved. Her mother wasn't wrong. She needed to do *something* with her life, after all.

Could she join a convent? It felt like a serious commitment, but... so was marriage. And at least becoming a nun was a commitment which would protect her, as opposed to threaten her. Not only that, but it would help her to fight her more primitive, less than ideal urges, to become a better person. No longer would she have to worry about what man she desired, or what man confused her for a libertine, or what man she kissed. She could forget about men entirely.

She was used to that sort of life, too. It was not as though it would be a radical change for her. The early wake ups, the busy pace, the prayers, the community aspect, and the lack of men. Even now, living with her parents again, three years since leaving boarding school, she still often rose with the sun. Her days were often busy and active. She still prayed regularly, as she had been taught. And she still craved returning to a loving community of girls and women.

Come to think of it... men just complicated everything anyway. Perhaps she had never adjusted to men? No... that was not it. There were plenty of men in her life that did not cause her trouble. Her father was a man and he was no problem. The Earl was a man and his advice had been fairly good, even if it had just led her in a circle again. The men who were a problem were men like Duke Perry, like Prince Ferdinand, like Lord Jones. The men who could not control their own desires, who chased more than one woman, who did not respect boundaries or feelings.

She did not need a life without men. She just needed a life without that sort of man. So was a convent really the answer to her problems? Could she truly spend the rest of her life without experiencing the warm embrace and the soft lips of a man who loved her? Without bearing children of her own, and watching them grow?

Sure, she had grown up in a community of girls and women, with strict regulations, no permanent male presences, and a focus on faith and education. But she had spent the entire time daydreaming about princes and princesses, about her ideal wedding, about being a wife and a mother. She was no more cut out to be a nun than the men in her life were to be husbands.

She wondered whether perhaps Antoinette could help her decide. But she was pretty sure Antoinette would be against it. Antoinette's advice was often good, but also often biased by her own rose-tinted perspective. Especially considering that her brother was about to get married. In less than a week, in fact. No, Antoinette would be too certain to tell her to wait and see who to marry. Or even to tell her to marry a specific man.

She needed someone less extroverted. Someone more sensible and cautious. Someone who could be the counterpart to her own impulsivity and passion. She needed to talk to Mary.

Chapter 22

Lucy sat in the drawing room, reading a book as her mother practised some embroidery. Both women sat in silence, unable to think about anything but Lucy's current predicament, but unwilling to talk about the situation either.

Thomas and Julia's wedding was approaching, and Lucy had still not seen Mary. It seemed that, as Duchess of York, she had better things to be doing at the end of summer than wait around for Lucy to talk to her. She was somewhere in Sheffield, or Birmingham, doing something of importance, most likely.

Lucy knew she had many other people to confide in. Antoinette, her own mother, Princess Elisaveta... there were enough women to talk to about her heartache. But Mary was who she needed to speak to. Mary was the one who would keep a level head through it all, who could tell her what she needed to do without becoming swept up in her own ideals and interests.

Until she could see Mary, Lucy felt a little lost.

“Mother?” she asked. “When do you think I ought to begin plans to go to the convent?”

“I am not sure when we shall send you. It may be a little cruel to send you away in Winter, before Christmas,” her mother said with a slight sigh.

Lucy just nodded. That sounded sensible. It was a complete shock to her, naturally, that her parents would be willing to send her to become a nun. It was rather rare for women of any status to become anything but heiresses and wives. But they were scared for her. She understood that. They were scared she may never get married, she may end up spending the rest of her life as an unwed, lonely, unsupported young woman. They were not sending her away because they wanted to hurt her, but because it was the only way they could see of protecting her.

“I simply...” she began. She stopped and sighed, putting her book

down. “I simply would like to know, because it is so sudden. I would like to know what to plan and what to pack, and have some time to think about the situation before I leave.”

“I suppose there is no urgency. A man will hesitate to marry a woman over twenty-five, but a convent will accept you regardless,” her mother replied, still concentrating on her sewing.

Lucy nodded again. “That makes sense. I would appreciate some additional time, to prepare myself for it.”

“It should not be too different to when you were in boarding school,” her mother replied, “and then at least you would be safe.”

“But I would be away possibly forever,” she replied.

“You would be able to come home, and we would be able to see you. Really, in terms of how long you would be away from home, it would not be much different than being married,” her mother said.

Lucy sighed. “But I would not be married.”

“Lucy, if no man is good enough, if no man is right for you... then what can we do? We cannot wait forever for something which would not happen. Most young women your age are already married. Certainly after nearly three years courting, one would expect you to have found someone.” Lady Fitzgerald shook her head. “No, we must protect your virtue and give you a purpose.”

“But how can I know that being a nun is my purpose?” Lucy asked.

“If you are not destined to marry, and you are too naïve to survive on your own, then you need to be somewhere you would be taken care of when we are gone. Somewhere you can cultivate virtue and do good in this world, to secure your place in paradise with us,” her mother insisted.

She nodded. “I suppose if that truly is the only way,” she said to herself quietly.

“I beg your pardon?” her mother asked.

She shook her head and smiled. “Nothing, I was just talking to myself,” she replied, picking her book up again.

Lucy still had her doubts, and was glad for the additional time. But unless a man made himself manifest in the following six to eight months, then what use was the time? If that man did not exist, then all the time in the world could not help.

If she was going to spend the rest of her life being this indecisive, then it was probably for the best that someone was finally taking the reins and making the decision for her.

Nevertheless, the sudden loss of control terrified her.



She made a point of dressing as modestly as possible on the day of the wedding. It would not be appropriate to show off her figure and her feminine features if she was not seeking a husband. It would send the wrong message, and then she may be approached by another Duke Perry or, worse yet, another Prince Ferdinand.

The wedding itself revived her own illusions and hopes for marriage. When she had been younger, this was exactly what she had pictured for her own wedding. A wedding that would never take place.

It was a beautiful affair. Although she knew that if she was to become a nun she would have to control her sinful thoughts and urges, she was nevertheless jealous of the couple who were enjoying such a fantastic day together. It made her heart sore to see it. The last summer flowers were so bright and beautiful, scattered about the church. It felt almost as though they had passed autumn and winter, and moved straight into next spring.

Great white bows were everywhere, on the ends of the pews, hanging from the unlit chandeliers, and pinned to the doors. The Byrd family crest was mounted high on the wall at the back of the church, signifying how their line was growing and strengthening with the addition of Julia.

Lucy watched the ceremony with a combination of awe and bitter jealousy. She could not believe how hostile she had been to this only a few months ago. It was not a terrible thing. It was beautiful. She had rejected it with such passion only because of Duke Perry. And now she craved it with equal passion thanks to Lord Jones.

After the ceremony she made her way to greet and congratulate the newly-weds. Thomas looked smart, but Julia looked positively radiant. Her smooth, long, dark hair hung freely about her head, and her deep brown eyes were enhanced by carefully applied makeup. Her cheeks were rosy, her lips glistened, and her stunning white dress hugged her body just enough to show off her nubile physique. Lucy could not help but wonder how she would have looked on her own wedding day, whether she would have been as beautiful as Julia...

“I suppose you are no longer angry at others for their happiness,” Thomas said.

Lucy blushed in shame. “No... I am sorry for my outbursts at you. I did not really understand. But I am so happy for you now.”

“I am not angry at you,” Thomas replied with a shrug. “Although I am confused.”

Julia nodded. “You used to be so keen on marriage. You were one of the first of us all to host play weddings. It is somewhat surreal to see you becoming so hostile towards it.”

“I am ashamed of my actions and words, to tell the truth,” Lucy said. “And I regret much of what I said.”

“But not all of it?” Thomas asked.

“I am just.” She paused. “I am not sure I am the sort of woman who marries. I suppose I was looking at the world through my own perspective, not realizing that other people see things differently,” Lucy replied. “But I am happy for you both. Wherever my own life goes from now, I am happy for you.”

Julia embraced her. “I am glad to hear you say that. But I am afraid we must go to the table again, it seems my parents are calling us over to see more relatives.” She smiled sweetly and, taking Thomas's hand and guiding him towards the table.

Lucy wondered about mingling. But what for? Nobody could take her mind off her fears. Nobody but Mary could advise her on what to do next. And it was not as though she needed to find a husband. It struck her how her every social interaction had been based around men. Now that she was not courting, she no longer knew what to do with herself.

Then Lucy saw him standing across the room. Lord Andrew Jones. Her heart began to beat hard and fast and her hands shook slightly. She wanted to walk up to him and talk to him. No, she wanted to see him outside the room and kiss him. She wanted to marry him. And he wanted to walk down a hallway with a woman who used to be his fiancée so he could do indecent things to her. Which was why she could not go and talk to him.

She pretended she had not seen him and wondered whether she could avoid him for the rest of the day. But he had seen her, and moments later she felt a hand gently brush her shoulder.

Turning around, she was directly face to face with Lord Jones. She felt herself blushing and stepped back a little, to put some space between

them. “Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning to you too,” he replied. “Were you not coming to see me?” he added.

“I did not know you would be here,” she said, wondering whether to make an excuse and leave, or to stay and talk to the man she had respected so much. His presence was such a terrible temptation to her.

“I thought you were simply avoiding me,” he replied, making eye contact with her, his voice taking on an accusing tone.

She shrugged. She could not deny it. “I suppose it is a little uncomfortable for me to be around a man who I desire, yet shall never marry,” she admitted. “I would much rather be alone than stranded in the face of temptation.”

“I see…” he replied. “I have missed you.” His voice was full of love and hurt, and his hands shook a little, as though he were stopping himself from immediately embracing her.

“I have missed you also, but I cannot spend too much time with someone who is only tempting me into sin,” she replied. It was oddly liberating to be able to say these things to him. It was as though some sharp shards which were hurting her were being removed.

“Why did you go so suddenly at the ball?” he asked, sounding genuinely hurt. “Was that because of what we have done? Because you could not be in the company of a man who at once loves you and can never marry you?”

“That was… for a different reason,” she replied. “Although I suppose it relates.”

“Please, tell me,” Lord Jones said. “I need to know.”

She looked into his eyes and saw genuine despair. He wanted to be with her as badly as she wanted to be with him. But if he would not marry her, and be loyal to her, then it could never be. She shook her head. “It does not matter very much anymore, does it?” she replied.

She wanted to tell him about everything. But how could she? Even thinking about what she had seen broke her heart. He had lied to her, betrayed her trust. And yet here he was again, pleading for her attention as though he had not kissed Clara, as though he were not still obsessed with her.

“It does matter to me,” he replied. “I would do anything to be able to be your friend again, even if nothing more.” His voice trailed off at

these last words. But how could he ask for anything more after what he had done?

“I... I am not sure we can only be friends. Especially after all that has occurred,” she said. She needed to get away from him. Even this conversation was driving her mind to sin.

“If you do not wish to see me anymore just because you're courting princes and earls, I do not mind. But at least be honest with me,” he said coldly.

“That is not the problem,” Lucy replied. “I am actually courting... nobody, right now.”

“Your parents are inviting in another parade of suitors to try and coax you into marriage, then?” Lord Jones asked, forcing a slight smile.

“Not at all. There is no man in my life. And there probably would never be,” she said. Could she tell him? She had to, did she not?

His eyes lit up. “Then what is the problem? If you and I shall never marry, then there is nothing to intrude upon us. We shall be able to talk, and be friends, if nothing else.” She could tell he was already thinking about more than talking and friendship. She had to stop this.

Lucy shook her head. “You do not understand... my parents think I may be happier in a convent.”

Lord Jones paused, then smiled. “That is a good joke,” he said, laughing a little and shaking his head. “A very good joke. You had me fooled for a moment there...”

Lucy just remained stoic and locked eyes with him sternly. He looked back into her eyes, searching for some hint that she was, as he hoped, joking.

He stopped laughing. “You are being serious?” he said quietly.

She nodded. “I am. It will not be for a few months yet, but my parents have given up all hope of me marrying, and have decided that at least I would remain virtuous and good and continue to contribute to society if I were a nun.”

“Miss Fitzgerald, I have to say that is one of the most ridiculous ideas I have ever heard. A convent would in no way suit you,” he explained. “I do not see why your parents think it is a good idea. They are only doing this because they hope it will spare them the shame of having an unwed daughter.”

Lucy huffed indignantly. “I shall have you know, Lord Jones, that they

are making this choice because after so long in boarding school, they believe I am suited to such an environment."

"A convent is not a boarding school, though," he replied. "They are very different places."

"I believe they are similar where it counts. I would be with other women, living independently, leading a structured, meaningful life," she insisted.

"It is not like that, though," he carried on. "A life of religious devotion... I have seen it myself. First hand. Most of the people on the Mission are priests and monks and nuns. It is not the sort of life you want to lead."

"How would you know what suits me?" she replied indignantly. "You do not even know me."

Before he could say anything else, she turned around and stormed out into the church gardens.

Chapter 23

Lucy knew she should not have acted so defensively, but it came so intuitively to her. She had to defend it. Because at least her parents, when they decided on something, could carry it through. At least they had the determination and drive to see it to its conclusion.

She could not allow him to disrespect her parents' decision for her, not when it was made with her best interests at heart. And especially not when she was unable to make a better choice of her own.

Besides... it was not as though Lord Jones were leaping at the opportunity to marry her and save her from that fate. It was not as though he had dropped down on one knee and proposed, to save her from becoming a nun. He was just telling her not to, without offering her any alternative whatsoever.

The fresh air in the garden was invigorating, although the sharpness of the wind and the billowing grey clouds on the horizon reminded her that summer was coming to an end. It felt strangely appropriate, that the heat and passion and beauty in the world were beginning to fade.

She walked down the path. The roses had all wilted now, and only a few summer blooms remained. Looking up she could spy the odd yellow leaf in the trees. Change was coming. Soon the trees would be red, and then they would be bare. Likewise, she had swapped her elegant dresses for modest, even matronly clothes. And soon she would swap those for a habit. It was for the best, though.

Hearing footsteps at the top of the garden, she wondered whether she should go back to the church. But the garden and the dying roses were calling to her, and the fresh air was clearing her mind. She continued walking. But the footsteps just got closer and closer. She had a pretty good idea who it was, but perhaps if she ignored him he would go back indoors.

“Lucy, wait.”

She turned around. It was Lord Jones again. She turned on her heels

and let out an indignant exclamation before continuing to walk down the path.

He did not get the message. He walked faster yet again, trying to catch up with her. He seized her hand. She pulled it away and continued walking, not once looking back at him. Then she heard the rustle through the grass as he ran past her, and all of a sudden he was in front of her. “Please, Lucy, just... please wait.”

She pushed past him and carried on walking, starting down the slope towards the firs at the bottom of the garden. He did not give up.

“Lucy, please listen to me,” he insisted. “I care about you. I truly do.”

She stopped and turned around. He was still standing where he had been as she pushed him, this time looking down the garden at her, sorrow in his eyes.

“You do not care about me. Not one ounce,” she replied.

“Lucy, I truly do. You are my friend. I need to know that you are safe and well,” he insisted, walking towards her.

“No, you only care about yourself. About your thoughts. Your feelings. Your needs. You expect me to act like you, to do as you do. Well I am nothing like you.”

“Lucy, you are making a terrible mistake,” he insisted. “That life is not for you.”

“If you actually cared about me you would be thinking about my future, about the life I need to lead in order to remain safe and happy,” she said. “I cannot remain unwed forever. I cannot survive on my own in this world. I need someone to care for me, even once my parents are gone.”

“But you are an adult woman,” he replied, standing close to her. “You are strong, and smart. You may not have experience living in this world alone, but that is something you can collect over time. You will not be a free person if you choose that life.”

Tears began streaming down her face. “You do not understand. I am not a woman. Maybe my body is, but not in here,” she touched her head, “or in here,” her hand rested on her heart. “Deep down... I am just a child.”

He shook his head. “But you are not.”

“But I am! I am indecisive, I am almost completely unaware of how the world at large works, I am unable to look after myself.” She wiped

the tears with the back of her hand. “I cannot live alone, Lord Jones.”

“Then... then get married. Our pact is not so serious, Lucy. If you are scared of being alone, then get married.” He ran a hand down the side of her face.

For a moment, her heart floated. This was it. He was going to propose to her. He was going to ask for permission to save her, to whisk her away from life as a nun and make her the happiest woman alive. Lady Lucy Jones.

“You can marry the Prince if you want,” he continued, “or the Earl. Or whoever you think is going to make your life easier.” He embraced her and it felt as though the world was coming to a standstill. “All I want is to make you happy,” he said, his voice shaking.

She was not sure what to make of this. Was he proposing? Was he hinting at the possibility of marrying him? Or was he saying she could marry anyone she wanted... but not him? She deeply hoped that was not the case. Because it was him, or it was nothing.

There was one way of knowing for sure.

She leaned her head back and pressed her lips to his. She had missed this. She had missed this beautiful sensation that overwhelmed her entire body. His lips were like sweet manna, bringing her to life. The whole world seemed suddenly brighter and warmer as she kissed him. She ran her fingers through his hair and moved her body closer to his. She needed him.

As his hands raised to her waist, she felt herself swooning. She wanted to feel those big, strong hands all over her body. She wanted him to hold her closely and protect her from the world as they kissed. And then... he pushed her back, forcing them apart, breaking the kiss.

She looked up. Had that just happened? Was he going to kiss her again, to hold her again? But no, he had a look of horror and disgust on his face. He shook his head slowly and sternly. Lucy stepped back, further away from him. She was in shock. He had pushed her away. Just like she had pushed Prince Ferdinand away. He was disgusted at her.

“I-I thought that y-you... Y-you started this...” she stammered in disbelief. “You kissed me first.”

“That was then. And this is now,” he replied. “Then... then we were both going to remain unwed. Now you are either to get married, or to become a nun. Either way, I cannot.”

“Do you not love me?” she asked, the tears returning to her eyes.

He looked to the floor. “Of course I love you. But I cannot claim what is not mine to claim. You belong to your husband, or to the church. Until then, you belong to your parents. You will never be mine. So I cannot act on my love for you.”

“But I need to marry,” she replied. “I do not want to be a nun. I want to get married. And I love you.”

He shook his head. “Lucy… this can never be. You can do whatever you please. Kiss princes, marry an earl, become a nun. But we can never be as one. You have to understand this.”

“Are you so committed to never marrying?” she asked quietly.

He nodded. “I am afraid so. You may be willing and able to go back on your word to me, but I cannot go back on my word to myself. You are, as you said, a child at heart. You made that vow not knowing what it meant to you. I made it knowing full well what I was doing.”

“But you said all you wanted was to make me happy,” she countered, wiping some more tears away.

He lifted his hand and stroked a lingering tear off her cheek. “I do. But not like that. Until you are an adult woman, who can handle herself, I cannot be with you.”

“Then just go,” she said quietly, sitting down on a tree stump and looking out over the garden.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked. “Are you asking me to… leave?”

“I am,” she replied bluntly, sniffling slightly. “I am not a woman. I need someone to look after me. And if you will not, I do not see what you are doing here.”

“I am making sure you come to no harm,” he replied. “I do not like seeing you out here, alone and sad, in the cold. Please, come back inside.”

“What do you care if I am alone and sad and cold? I am not yours, remember?” She felt the tears trying to start again.

“Does that mean I am not allowed to show any concern for you?” he asked. “Can I not have some sympathy for you?”

“No. Leave me and go back to the wedding, with the happy people,” she insisted.

“You know, you are right,” he said, his voice taking on an angry tone. “You really are a child. I cannot believe I was taking you seriously.”

His words felt like knives cutting through her heart. But, as she had done for so many suitors before, she sat motionless and silent, waiting for him to leave in a fit of rage.

“You are being ridiculous,” he said.

She heard the rustle of his shoes through the grass as he walked back up the slope, towards the church. She wanted to turn around and look, see if he was looking back at her. But she did not. She kept her eyes locked on the bottom of the garden.

Lucy sighed. She could see the graveyard out beyond the gardens. That was the end, whoever you were, whatever you did. All that counted was doing the right thing in life. And the right thing was to become a nun.

Being with a man she could not marry would hurt her parents, and put her at risk, not to mention be a grave sin. And marrying a man she could not trust or love would condemn them both to a miserable life. She could not become like the men she resented so much. She could not go around breaking hearts and ruining lives left and right.

With a heavy sigh, she stood up. The garden was empty once again. She began to walk back up towards the church.

The wedding had lost all of its life and colour to her eyes. It was not her world. It was not what she was going to experience. She still felt glad that Thomas and Julia were able to experience such joy together. Good for them. Just because she could never be truly happy did not mean nobody else deserved to be.

She slipped through the cheerful crowd towards the great figure of Jesus, the only Lord who truly mattered. His faded painted colours disappeared into the background compared to the bright flowers and white ribbons. But He was still there. He was always there, watching over everything they did.

She sat down in front of the great figure and looked up at Him. He had suffered in His life. Far, far more than she was suffering. He had suffered for her sins and she, so ungratefully, had continued to sin regardless. There were so many people out there, suffering more than her, and living good, pious lives. She could bear her pains and resist temptation. She could become a nun, not because it was what she wanted, but because it was the right thing to do.

She needed to stay away from the men who had influenced her so poorly, who had led her astray. She needed to focus only on faith, until she was healed of her own sinful nature. Perhaps then she would find true happiness.

No, the right thing to do would be to make amends with Andrew. She had been just as guilty as he was, and they needed to forgive one another to move on. It was in a lack of forgiveness that pain was born. Was that not one of Jesus Christ's most poignant teachings? Was that not what the Our Father said? “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

If her sin was to be forgiven, then she needed to show forgiveness to Lord Jones. If she did not, then she could leave pain behind her, just as Duke Perry, Lord Jones, and Prince Ferdinand had left pain behind them. She needed to move beyond that.

She needed to find Andrew, to forgive him for what he had done to her, to ask him to forgive her. They needed to part ways as friends, not as enemies.

Returning to the wedding party, she looked up and down for him, but he had already gone, it seemed. She swerved among the remaining guests, looking at every man, but not finding his face anywhere. But she could not give up. She needed to make this right. She needed to save him from a life of sin and pain like she had been living.

Perhaps someone else would know where he was. But all around her were unfamiliar faces, no doubt from Julia's extended family and many friends. She could not approach a stranger and ask after a man they probably did not even know. She needed to find a mutual friend.

Lucy finally found Antoinette. Her friend was talking with Julia, and Mary. But it was too late to talk to them. None of them were any use to Lucy now. She had made up her mind. She just needed to find Lord Jones, that was all.

Lucy marched over to the group swiftly. “Have you seen Lord Jones?” she asked before her friend could even speak. “I have something important to tell him.”

Antoinette paused. “I saw him earlier. I think he left, though...” she replied.

“Oh, I saw him go with Clara Neal,” Mary added.

Lucy could feel her blood boiling slightly. But no, she needed to give him the benefit of doubt. After all, she was chasing after him, not for any sinful or carnal purpose, but for the sake of resolution. Perhaps he and Clara also had some matters to resolve, some wounds to heal, a conclusion to reach. She could not jump to conclusions.

And she could not use this as an excuse to run away. No, she needed to find him and talk to him. Even if he was acting improperly, two wrongs would not make a right. She still needed her own resolution, even if he never found his.

She knew her mother would not approve of what she was going to do. She needed to borrow a coach. She seized Antoinette's hand and took her aside.

“I am going to need to take your coach,” she said quietly.

“To Lord Jones's house?” Antoinette asked.

Lucy nodded. “Yes. And please do not tell my mother where I am.”

Antoinette shook her head. “I am not sure if that is a good idea...”

“It is not for anything inappropriate,” Lucy reassured her. “I simply wish to ask him to forgive me for my behaviour until now.”

“And it is nothing to do with the fact he left in the company of Clara Neal?” Antoinette asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Nothing whatsoever,” Lucy confirmed.

“Just... do not do anything you will regret later,” Antoinette insisted. “And return before your mother discovers you are gone. Or else we will all be in trouble.

Lucy hugged her friend closely. “Thank you so much. I will be an hour at most. I just need to have a word with him,” she explained.

Antoinette hugged her tightly. “Are you sure you do not want anyone to come with you?” she asked.

“No, I need you here to keep my mother from discovering where I have gone,” Lucy replied.

“Take care then,” Antoinette said, “and make sure to stay safe.”

Lucy felt her chest and stomach tight with anxiety as she rushed from the church to the coach Antoinette had called out for her. If her mother caught her she would be in a great deal of trouble. But nobody even noticed her leave, it seemed, and soon she was arriving at her destination.

Lord Jones's house was as quiet as always. Unlike many of the other houses Antoinette visited, this one lacked any feminine influence whatsoever, and as such it had a simple, low-maintenance quality which did not require the usual bustling servant activity.

And yet it felt a little... too quiet. More quiet than usual. Perhaps he was not even in...

She asked the coach to wait by the gates and walked on her own up to the door. There was no bell, and no knocker. Lucy knocked with her bare knuckles as hard as she could and waited for someone to answer. Nothing.

She knocked again, remembering she had seen no coach outside. Perhaps he was at Clara Neal's house? She felt a pang of jealousy. She knew she did not need to. She was not his. He was not hers. What difference would it make if he spent all day with Clara Neal? The two of them could live forever in a nest of sin, for all the difference it would make to Lucy's life. But she could not help but feel pain at the thought.

Giving up, she turned around and decided to make her way back to the wedding. It was better than standing there, imagining Andrew and Clara embracing one another in bed. As she walked back down the path, she heard the door open behind her. She turned around. It was Lord Jones himself.

“Lucy?” he said, his voice sounding as eager and excited as a schoolboy with a new toy.

She smiled and began walking back up the path. She felt sorry to see him so excited and happy. She shook her head. “Do not look so happy, this is a purely formal visit,” she said.

He nodded, but still smiled, as though he were just glad to be in her presence again. “I am terribly sorry to keep you waiting,” he said as he closed the door behind her. “The staff had the day off because they

did not expect me to return. Feel free to leave your coat and bonnet on the dresser."

She wondered whether she should just say what she needed to say then and there. But no... that would be too cold, would it not? She slipped out of her coat, took off her bonnet, and placed them neatly on the dresser by the door, before following Lord Jones through to his front room.

Normally he seemed so calm, so cold, with a slight hint of vulnerability behind it all. But now... Now it was all out in the open. And it made her feel bad for rejecting him. It made her feel bad for breaking his heart. But she was going to put things to rights now. Perhaps it would not make him feel any better. But at least it would give him the opportunity to not descend into hatred.

She sat down on the sofa and looked around. "I heard that you left with Clara Neal," she said.

Lord Jones froze briefly, a little startled, but then nodded. "I did." He moved in beside her and sat down, their thighs touching.

"I was just wondering why," she said, trying to ignore his leg against hers. "Especially considering everything you said about her, about how much you loathe her. How much she hurt you."

"We had some things to discuss, that is all." She could detect some nervousness in his voice. Something was not right.

"Such as?" she asked.

"It is personal. But I just wanted to make sure that some of the... some of the remaining bad feelings we had for one another were addressed. That we could put our troubles behind us and perhaps someday be friends again," he explained. He placed his hand on hers softly.

Lucy sighed slightly in relief and nodded. "I understand that. It is somewhat like what I wish to talk to you about, actually," she added. She turned her hand around beneath his and clasped his strong fingers between her dainty ones.

"And what would that be?" Lord Jones asked.

"I would like us to forgive one another. For everything we have done. For encouraging one another to hate those we once loved. For tempting one another, and for acting on temptation," she explained, squeezing his hand.

"So you did not mean to hurt me like you did back at the church?" he

asked.

Lucy smiled softly. “No, I do not mean to insult or hurt you. And you are right. If I need someone to take care of me, it is foolish to expect that person to be you.”

“And, for what it is worth, I did not mean to hurt you either with what I said. I should control my emotions, and I should not attack your choices. You are doing what is right by you, and by your family. And that is no business of mine,” he replied, leaning in so his face was a little closer to hers.

She nodded. “So... I forgive you for everything that I have done to you, and hope we can remain friends, or else part ways on good terms.” She turned her face up towards him. She chastised herself. What was she doing? They were just having this very conversation! And yet here she was, leaning in to lock lips with him again.

He bowed his head further, his mouth millimetres from hers as he began to speak again, his warm breath tickling her lips.

“And I—” But he could not finish. His words were interrupted by the sound of a door slamming in the house.

“I thought there was nobody here?” Lucy asked with a start.

“There is not meant to be,” Lord Jones replied, glancing in the direction the sound had come from.

There was a loud clatter, like someone emptying a box of cutlery onto the floor, followed by a rustling and then a groaning of furniture being moved. It was coming from down the hallway.

“I need to see to that, perhaps the maid is back and we can get a cup of tea before she gets started on the dusting,” he said.

Lucy nodded. “That is a most excellent idea,” she said, “I am thirsty and a cup of tea would be just perfect.” She released his hand, feeling suddenly nervous at what she had been about to do. Or, better said, to do again.

“Very well, just wait here, I shall return immediately,” Lord Jones said, standing up and making his way out the door.

Lucy could detect a certain hastiness in the way he moved, a slight nervousness in his voice... And she had never known any maid to make such noises when cleaning. So who was it that he was going to find down the hall?

Curiosity was eating away at her. She knew it was wrong, but she

crept up to the open door. Peering out, she saw Lord Jones literally running down the stone floor, towards a door which had a bright light shining underneath it. He stopped by the door and knocked. He fidgeted and knocked again. There was a click which echoed down the hall as the door was unlocked. Lord Jones opened the door and let himself into the room.

Lucy did not see anyone else, but she knew this was not quite right. This was not how a man behaved around his servant. No... he was up to no good. And he knew exactly who it was in that room. She had a pretty good idea herself...

He had left the other door slightly ajar. Lucy could hear two voices talking animatedly, but she could not quite make out what they were saying. She quietly stepped out of the front room and into the hallway and began to carefully creep towards the open door, listening for the voices. Suddenly they stopped. She wondered if perhaps someone was about to emerge from the room. Freezing on the spot, she waited for something, anything, to happen. But the silence remained. And she began creeping towards the room again.

As she approached the door, she heard a muffled moan. Two muffled moans. Two voices. A man and a woman, both mumbling and moaning softly like animals in heat. She knew what was the right thing to do. The right thing to do was return to the front room and wait for him to return. To pretend she had heard nothing at all.

But no, she could not keep doing that. She needed to see. She needed to catch him. She needed to confront him. To confront them. With a determined step, she marched up to the door and shoved it open.

Lucy knew what she would see. But it still brought tears to her eyes. Lord Jones was sitting on top of a dressing table in what looked like a guest room. A lady's coat, shawl, and bonnet were on the unmade bed. The candles burned brightly, and the room smelled of perfume and roses. And in front of Lord Jones, her lips on his neck, his fist clenched in her hair, was Clara Neal.

Lord Jones had frozen at the sound of the door opening, and slowly turned his head to face the doorway. He locked eyes with Lucy through the open door. Suddenly he pushed Clara back, causing her to exclaim angrily at him. Then she looked up, noticing Lucy, gasped and blushed, stepping away from the desk.

Lucy lifted her hand and quickly rubbed away her tears. She could not afford to show weakness in front of them. Especially not at a time like this.

“I thought you said she was at her home?” Lucy asked.

He shook his head. “Well… I…. I did not want to hurt you.”

“How could it hurt me?” she asked. “What do I care who you decide to commit indecencies with?”

“It is not what… I can explain,” he said.

“No, you cannot,” she replied. “I know what I am seeing, there is nothing to explain. Nothing to justify. No more than anyone would need to explain why the sun rises in the morning.”

Lord Jones shook his head again. “Lucy, please, just listen for once in your life!”

“To be honest, I am not too bothered by what you choose to do with Clara. What sins you would commit together. I just cannot believe you would be such a… filthy hypocrite,” Lucy said.

He put his head to one side. “Whatever do you mean?” he asked.

“All you said about hating her, avoiding her, all those remarks about Prince Ferdinand and I… And yet look at you. I expected better of you,” she said indignantly.

“What do you mean better?” Clara interrupted angrily. “I am the best woman he will ever so much as touch.”

Lucy glared at Clara. “No, you are not the best anything. You are just as much of a hypocrite as he is. So much for being able to lust after men without laying with them. So much about being happy with your fiancé. I suppose I need to assume from now on that everyone is doing the very things they condemn.”

“Well… it was a moment of passion, really,” Clara began. “Just this once…”

“No, I saw you back at the ball too. That is why I left. Because I was disgusted. Because I wanted Andrew for myself,” she said coldly.

“You…. you did?” Lord Jones asked. His face flushed hot red, his voice rang with hope.

Lucy nodded, tears welling up in her eyes again. “Of course I did. That is why I am unable to marry. That is why I wanted to kiss you back at the church. That is why it hurts me so much to see you and Clara together.”

Lord Jones looked at his own feet. “Lucy, if only you would listen

to me—”

“Well he is mine. I own him, heart and soul,” Clara said. “I may not be able to marry him, I may marry Edmund, but Andrew will always be mine.”

“Very well,” Lucy replied. “You may keep him. It is only your own soul you are selling.”

Lord Jones shook his head. “Please, do not listen to her. She came here to start trouble and that is just what she is doing.”

“And I came to forgive you, and to seek your forgiveness,” Lucy said. “I do still forgive you, for what it is worth. But I do not care if a two-faced snake like yourself forgives me or not.”

She turned and walked out the room, sweeping up her bonnet and coat in one swift motion before reaching for the door.

She could hear him calling out for her, but she did not care. She opened the door and stepped outside. Glancing back down the hallway as she pulled the door shut, she saw him standing there, with Clara's arms wrapped firmly around his waist.

She closed the door and, tears in her eyes, began walking back to the coach.

This was it. At least she had told him she forgave him. Now she had to try and find it in her heart to actually forgive him.

The ride back to the wedding was painful. She was not sure what she would do when she faced her mother, her father, her friends.

All she knew was that the man she wanted was gone for good.

Or, better said, he had never even existed.

Chapter 25

Lucy wondered whether she ought not feel a little more resolved than she presently did. After all, she did not want to marry Lord Jones anymore, he did not wish to marry her, and she had forgiven him and made her own apologies. It was all wrapped up, neatly topped with a bow, and ready to be thrown into the closet with whatever other mountain of skeletons he had accumulated.

But she did not feel resolved. Seeing him with Clara, like that... having him lie to her face... All she felt was anger and betrayal. She had not minded that he did not want to get married. She had not minded him being too forward, if anything she had very much enjoyed his passion. But she could not forgive him for lying to her. And that hurt her deeply.

As the coach pulled up outside the church, she noticed that coaches and horses were beginning to leave already. The church would be much less busy, and everyone would be meeting somewhere else for lunch.

Hoping nobody had noticed her absence, she slipped back into the wedding. The room was still fairly crowded, thankfully. People milled back and forth, wine was still being served, and she couldn't see very far ahead at all. All she needed to do was inform Antoinette that she had returned and then everything would be as though she had never left.

She looked up and down the room for her friend. Then, spying her over by the window, she began marching towards her, straight through the middle of the room. This was a poor decision. She realised she should have stuck to the walls. Suddenly it was very visible that she had just come in through the front door.

Lady Fitzgerald, noticing someone entering, practically pounced on her daughter. “Lucy! Where have you been?”

“Nowhere,” Lucy said as blankly as she could. “I was here.”

Her mother's eyes narrowed. “Do not lie to me. I have not seen you in

an hour. Where were you?"

"I have simply been busy," she replied with a slight laugh. "I am not sure how come you have not seen me, perhaps we have just managed to bump into one another?"

"It looked to me as though you have just come back. If you continue to lie to me I shall have to punish you," her mother insisted.

Lucy shuffled a little and shook her head. "I was just outside. Getting some fresh air."

"Walking?" her mother asked.

Lucy shook her head. "No, I took a coach. I needed to get out for a bit, that is all."

"Lucy, where were you?" her mother asked in an angry whisper, obviously becoming more and more agitated.

Then Antoinette appeared, like an angel swooping in to rescue Lucy from her mother.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"Lucy has been wandering off, taking coaches to heavens know where, and will not tell me what she was doing," her mother explained. "Perhaps you can talk some sense into the child."

"It is fine, I simply asked the coach to take her for a drive up and down the road. She was feeling a little faint," Antoinette said.

"Is that so?" Lady Fitzgerald asked.

Lucy nodded earnestly. "That is precisely the case."

"Then why did you not tell me sooner?" her mother asked, shaking her head. "And why did you send her out without telling me?" she said to Antoinette. "I would expect you to be more responsible, and more respectful of your elders, now you are a married woman."

"A duchess," Antoinette replied casually, as though trying to remind Lady Fitzgerald that the tables had turned in terms of their social rank. "And she was just in my coach, nothing would have happened to her."

Lady Fitzgerald seemed suspicious, but nevertheless placed her trust in Antoinette's word. "I beg your pardon, Your Grace. I am simply... I was worried about my daughter, that is all," she said, her voice much softer and a slight smile on her lips.

Antoinette, maintaining her poise, simply nodded. “It is fine. I hope you are grateful that I am looking after her?”

Lady Fitzgerald nodded back. “Of course I am, Your Grace.”

“Very well, shall we return to celebrating before we all adjourn to the mansion for lunch?” Antoinette asked.

Lady Fitzgerald nodded and curtsied, obviously uncomfortable with this new power structure. “Of course.” And with that, she left, casting a suspicious glance at the young women over her shoulder.

“All done,” Antoinette said with a sweet smile. “It seems your mother's obsession with status serves a purpose besides irritating us.”

“Thank you,” Lucy replied. “Had you not intervened, I am not sure I could have prevented her from locking me in my room for the remainder of the year.”

“She would lock you in there for the rest of your days if she knew where you actually were, never mind a year!” Antoinette replied. “You're almost as bad as I was.”

Lucy shook her head slowly. “I have heard the stories and if they are true, nobody is anywhere near as bad as you were.”

Antoinette giggled a little. “Depends on the story.”

“Apparently you once trekked out over snowy fields in the middle of the night, all on your own, to see Duke Perry, and he wasn't even a Duke then,” Lucy replied.

Antoinette nodded firmly. “Well, that one is true.”

A faint suspicion struck Lucy. “Was that when he was supposed to be courting me?” she asked.

Antoinette shook her head. “That was before. Before I even realised what he meant to me. I just desperately wanted the company and support of a good friend.”

“I see...” Lucy replied.

“Did you have the conversation you wished to, and resolve the matter?” Antoinette asked.

“Well, I had the conversation I wished to, but it did not quite go as I would have liked,” she replied.

“Oh dear, is the matter not resolved?” Antoinette pressed.

Lucy shrugged. What could she say? That she had extended her forgiveness to the man she wanted to marry, she no longer wanted to marry him because he was a lying lascivious adulterer, but she still resented him being a lying lascivious adulterer because she secretly still wanted to marry him? It didn't even make sense to herself. How could she be so possessive of a man she could not and would not marry?

Lucy sighed heavily. “I suppose you could say the matter is put to rest,” she finally replied.

“Then what is the problem?” Antoinette asked softly.

Lucy shrugged. “I just wish it did not have to be like this. I am sure there would be a better way, if only everyone else did exactly what they ought to and none of what they ought not to.”

Antoinette laughed. “Everything would be much easier, I agree. But that is not the world we live in.”

“I know,” Lucy replied, “and in this world people end up doing things they do not want to because the things they want to do are not possible.”

“Are you truly so intent on becoming a nun?” Antoinette asked. “From what your mother was saying you are truly committed to it. But from what you are saying it sounds as if you are not quite so happy with the situation.”

“It is the best option for me,” Lucy replied. “Not the one I would prefer, but the best option of all the ones which are actually available to me.”

“Sounds more to me like you are choosing the simplest option so that you do not need to overthink matters, or rely on others,” Antoinette said.

Lucy looked away, feeling somewhat attacked. Her hands shook a little. “Perhaps so. But it is not as though I have a better option. If other people cannot be relied upon to do what is right, then I must choose a path that does not rely on other people.”

“I thought you wanted children,” Antoinette replied.

Lucy shrugged.

Antoinette sighed. “Lucy, you cannot go through life missing out on all your heart desires just because you can't have some of those things. You need to try and seize what you want.”

“Well everyone is telling me what they wish for me to do, what I ought to do, what they would do in my situation,” Lucy said angrily, “and nobody is considering what I want, or feel, or think. It's so easy to *say* I should make more of an effort, or do more, but you're not the one who had to do it.” Her heart ached. “Of course I want children. Seeing you and Duke Perry with little Bea... It is beautiful. But a woman needs a man to bear children. And there is no man I have met who I would trust to be a father.”

“Not even Lord Jones?” Antoinette asked.

Lucy's face flushed red. “Especially not Lord Jones. Even if he were available to marry, knowing what I now know I could not in good conscience subject a child to his parenting.”

“And you're not willing to give anyone else an opportunity to prove you wrong?” Antoinette asked.

Lucy shook her head. “I have given plenty of opportunities and largely been disappointed.”

“And yet it is always when you least expect it that these matters resolve themselves,” Antoinette said with a smile.

“I am giving it some time, but unless a miracle happens, I shall be heading for a convent next year,” she explained.

Antoinette nodded. “I understand. I just hope that you do not have to make a choice which does not suit you, that is all.”

“I hope so also,” Lucy replied. “But I shall hope for the best and prepare myself for the worst.”

“Shall we go for lunch?” Antoinette asked, looking at the remaining people slowly making their way towards the door.

“Yes, it seems about time,” Lucy said.

She had been about to follow Antoinette out of the church to Antoinette's own coach, but they both immediately spotted Lady Fitzgerald stood at the door, a slightly angry look on her face, and they both knew Lucy would be travelling in the Fitzgerald coach.

Lucy knew something was wrong when her mother did not speak to her during the entire trip back to the mansion. Everything she said was met with a monosyllabic reply, or just ignored. Lucy had never seen her mother quite like this before. She had seen it in other girls, of course. But never her own mother.

As they descended from the coach and began to walk towards the

mansion, Lucy pulled Lady Fitzgerald aside. “Mother, is anything the matter?” she asked. “Please tell me.”

Lady Fitzgerald sighed again. “I doubt you will listen, with how you have become recently.”

“I shall, I promise,” Lucy insisted.

“Is there nothing we can do to persuade you to see Prince Ferdinand again?” her mother asked.

Lucy was a little shocked. “It is not about persuading me,” she replied. “I would not mind seeing him again but the fact of the matter is that he is not quite interested in marriage.”

“Are you sure of that?” her mother asked. “Did you even give him a chance? He is a Prince, for heavens' sake, Lucy.”

“He had a chance and he is not interested, what more could I have done?” Lucy replied in frustration. She dug her shoe into the ground. “If he is not interested, he is not interested.”

“Well perhaps he would have been interested if you were not such a tomboyish spoilt child,” her mother replied.

“But it is not up to me,” Lucy insisted, “he is a free man and he has chosen the sort of life which does not lend itself to marriage.”

“I do not quite believe that,” her mother said. “Is that not the same excuse you used against Lord Jones? That he is not the marrying type? I think it is more that they are not the type to marry a girl who acts as you do.”

Her mother's words felt like knives through her heart. Tears filled Lucy's eyes. “I tried. I tried for both of them,” she said. The first time she had even bothered to make an effort in years and she was being told off for doing it wrong?

“I cannot help but have my doubts, Lucy,” Lady Fitzgerald replied. “You have done this so many times before...”

“We honestly have so little in common,” Lucy replied. “It is not my fault if a man decides to live a more *unconventional* life.”

Lady Fitzgerald shook her head. “I cannot help but wonder if men are choosing such unconventional lives because girls like you are refusing to grow up.”

“Perhaps these men are just boys who have failed to grow up also. It is not all my fault,” Lucy insisted, wiping her tears with the back of her

hand, hoping nobody who knew her saw this.

“However would you know when you have such a terrible attitude?” her mother replied.

“But I was not doing anything. They just... they did not like me. Who I was. Who I am. How can I help that?” she said.

“Perhaps you should try and be a different sort of a person,” her mother insisted. “Perhaps then you would not be considering becoming a nun before your twenty-fifth birthday.”

“Do you truly believe this is what I want?” Lucy asked, shaking her head, wiping the tears again.

“It seems to be. If you want anything else, you are going the wrong way entirely about it. All you seem to do is flit this way and that, wasting everyone's time,” Lady Fitzgerald concluded, turning her back on Lucy and walking into the mansion, leaving the girl stood just inside the porch, tears silently falling.

Lucy was not sure what else she could say or do to persuade her mother. It was as if nothing would be good enough. Lady Fitzgerald was convinced her daughter was still pushing men away. Even when it was the men themselves who were inappropriate, it was now Lucy's fault. And until she won a man over, she could not persuade her mother that she was doing her best.

She could not blame her, after all. She had spent so much of her life pushing men away for no reason... Now it just seemed as if all those efforts were pointless. Even when she was trying so hard to win men over, nothing worked out. The men pushed themselves away just fine without her help.

Perhaps she really was a truly undesirable person?

Chapter 26

It always seemed as though every time Lucy went to a social gathering, something would happen to ruin it for her. Perhaps her mother was right, though. Perhaps it wasn't men, or social expectations, or even other people that made her social life complicated and frustrating. Perhaps it was just *her*. Perhaps she was the sort of unlikeable, annoying, childish person who nobody could stand, but they were too polite to say anything to her face, so they did everything they could just to get her to go away.

She stood on the porch, to the side, away from the door, in the afternoon shade, wondering if she should even bother going in or just take the coach back home. But at least she knew she had some friends in there. Antoinette was truly her friend, and it seemed as though Duke Perry wanted to be a friend to her too. And two good friends would be worth enduring all the two-faced people in the world.

She was determined to make her way back into the reception fresh-faced and confident. Sneaking in, she found the ladies' room to wash away her tears and apply a new layer of makeup before she moved on to lunch. The people who loved her, however few, would not mind waiting. And those who did not love her would not notice her unless they found something to criticize. She would not give them the satisfaction.

Once she was confident she looked pristine, and only a vague hint of puffiness remained, she made her way through to the dining room and looked for Antoinette, so that they could sit together. But as she emerged from the hall, she spied a flash of bright blonde hair. Clara. She was back from Lord Jones's house. Where they had been... No. She did not want to think about it. It was not necessary.

Spotting Antoinette and Duke Perry already seated further up the table, Lucy made her way over to them, avoiding making eye contact with Clara. It would be for the best that they just not talk, or even acknowledge one another, ever again.

As she approached Antoinette immediately noticed something was

wrong. She stood up and invited Lucy to the empty seat beside her.

“Please, sit with me,” Antoinette insisted. “You seem troubled?”

Lucy followed Antoinette's directions and settled in, looking down the table a little nervously. “Clara Neal is here,” she said.

“That's nice. The two of you got along when you last met, did you not?” Antoinette said, returning to her seat.

“It's just that... It's just that when I was at Lord Jones's house she was there,” Lucy said.

Antoinette nodded. “I... I do not see, if I am honest with you.”

“She and Lord Jones were alone there. They went to his house to spend some time together,” Lucy nodded down the table.

Antoinette's eyes followed the direction of Lucy's nod. “That makes sense. They left together.”

“And they were there alone? Not even the servants were home. Lord Jones even lied about her being there at first,” Lucy continued. She was not sure whether to drop a heavier hint or just say it outright to Antoinette. Was it right? Was it even necessary? “He said nobody was home, and when I heard her moving around he said it was a maid.”

“Well, there is nothing wrong with that,” Antoinette replied. “Perhaps they were talking about something private. The two of them need to discuss what happened, and to find some sort of closure before they can move on with their lives.”

“I am not sure 'closure' is what I would call what I saw,” Lucy replied.

Antoinette raised an eyebrow and seemed a little excited at the sound of gossip. “What did you see?”

Well, it was too late now. She had begun to tell Antoinette, so she had to finish. And besides, what did it matter if others would call her a gossip, or Clara would be angry? Antoinette was her friend, and friends came before society.

“He was kissing her,” Lucy replied. “He lied to me about her being there, and I caught him kissing her, and then he begged for my forgiveness.”

“That is,” Antoinette paused and looked into her wine, as though trying to find the right words, “unexpected.”

Lucy nodded. “I'll say. Especially after everything he said about her.”

“And everything she kept saying about moving on,” Antoinette continued. “I suppose it is one of those cases where the more someone talks about something, the guiltier they are of it.”

“Is that true?” Lucy asked.

“What?” Antoinette responded.

Lucy paused. “Is it true that the more you talk about something, the guiltier you are of it, even if you speak badly of it?”

Antoinette shrugged. “In their case it seems to be. Though... It'd be best not to say anything to anyone else.”

“How come?” Lucy asked, baffled and slightly annoyed that Antoinette was telling her what to do. “They are the ones that did it. Why should it be my fault if I tell others what I saw? If they hadn't wanted anyone to know about it, they should never have done it in the first place.”

“It is not worth ruining three lives over, Lucy,” Antoinette insisted in a low voice. “They will not have another chance. Hopefully they will seek to redeem themselves.”

“But what if they continue to try it? Does Edmund not deserve to know? What if Lord Jones chose to marry? Would his wife not deserve to know?” Lucy insisted.

Antoinette shook her head. “People do bad things. What they have done so far may be very innocent. No worse than yourself or I have done. If they continue to do it when they are married that is another matter entirely. But why would you ruin someone's entire marriage over a few seconds of poor judgement?”

“I suppose you are right,” Lucy replied. “I saw nothing else.”

“And God has a way of making these things right if they do not redeem themselves,” Antoinette added.

“What if I am God's way of making thing's right?” Lucy said slightly spitefully.

“No, you are just angry at them for being hypocrites. It helps nobody, Lucy, let it go,” Antoinette insisted.

Lucy pursed her lips and glared down the table. “Very well. I shall trust your judgement.”

She still felt slightly bitterly towards Clara, but Antoinette was right. Who *would* she help by telling others what she had seen?

“I'm going to find my husband,” Antoinette said, slightly exasperated. “You wait for me here and I will be right back.”

Lucy watched as Antoinette walked out into the hallway. She carried on sipping her wine, wondering if her mother would be angry that they were not sitting together, or too distracted socializing to notice. She also wondered whether her mother realised how hurtful she had been, or even cared. Perhaps she was wallowing in guilt this very moment. Perhaps she thought she had done Lucy a favour...

A hand landed on her shoulder. Thinking it was Antoinette, Lucy turned around from the waist, smiling and getting ready to start talking again. But it was not Antoinette. A pretty blonde woman smiled down at her.

Lucy nearly jumped out of her skin. “Clara?” she asked. “How... surprising.”

“Lucy... we need to talk,” Clara said. Lucy then noticed the tension and nervousness in Clara's smile, and the beads of sweat on her forehead. “In private, if we can.”

Lucy was not sure about this. But she was also dying of curiosity to see what Clara might say about the situation. She nodded, stood up, and followed Clara out of the room, down the hallway, and into a little empty room that looked as though it had at one time been a cloakroom.

“What is it you need to say?” Lucy asked. She was trying not to sound too curious, but she knew it was obvious. Then again, what did it matter? It was clear Clara needed to get this off her chest.

“I just wanted to apologize for what you saw,” Clara said nervously. “For what we did. I got carried away. It was never supposed to happen.”

“I should say,” Lucy replied. “You and he are no longer engaged. What would Edmund think?”

“That's precisely it,” Clara said, “he can never find out.”

Lucy scowled. “I am not sure if it is the right thing, to keep this from him,” she said. Regardless of what she had told Antoinette, Clara did not know she was not going to tell anyone. And she got a little bit of satisfaction from tormenting her.

“I know that you love Andrew, but there are better ways of handling this,” Clara insisted.

Lucy shook her head. “You do not understand, I am not interested in him. I shall become a nun by next year.”

“But you *do* love him,” Clara replied. “Just because you cannot have him does not mean you do not love him. It's plain to everyone.”

“Is it?” Lucy asked.

“It is. And that is precisely why you cannot tell a soul. They will just think you are being jealous of him,” Clara said.

Lucy could see what Clara was doing. She could see that she was just trying to get Lucy to back down by threatening her with humiliation.

“I swear, I shall not tell a soul,” Lucy reassured her.

“Oh thank you,” Clara said, breathing a sigh of relief. “I knew I could trust in you. You will not regret this. It is better for everyone this way.”

Lucy nodded. “Of course it is.”

Clara wrapped her arms around Lucy in a spontaneous embrace. “You are a wonderful person, Lucy. Now, let us return to lunch.”

Lucy nodded again in agreement and followed Clara. She had nothing else to say. Clara's transparent attempt at manipulating her had made her angrier than before. But it didn't change anything in reality. Clara being mean did not change Lucy's agreement with Antoinette, or the situation for the three people whose lives would be ruined should Lucy say what she had seen.

Although her heart was breaking in two, she knew nothing could be gained by bringing it out into the open.

“What did happen in there?” Lucy asked softly as they approached the dining room.

Clara paused. “Oh, you know men,” she said, shrugging. “They do not know what they are doing most of the time.”

“I'm sorry about all the trouble,” Lucy said.

“I'm sorry you had to see *that*.” Clara shook her head. “It was not right. It will never happen again.” She pulled the door open and they both began to walk back towards the table.

Lucy nodded. “You still love him also, it is understandable. I suppose I ought to apologize to Andrew for storming out,” she said, looking around.

“Oh, he's not here. He stayed back at his house,” Clara replied.

“Did he have anything to do?” Lucy asked.

Clara shrugged. “I do not think so. I think he was just a little alarmed by all that happened this afternoon, and needed a break.”

Lucy was a little surprised. “Why not? If it was all a misunderstanding, then—”

“It's not a misunderstanding,” Clara interrupted and a hoarse whisper. “What you saw was what was happening. He and I still love one another very much. And just because we cannot be together does not mean we have stopped loving. I am sure you of all people understand that. Now, let us not speak of this in public.”

Lucy nodded. Still, something felt wrong. Besides the fact that Andrew and Clara were seeing one another behind Edmund's back. Besides Clara's attempts at manipulation. Something was quite simply, purely, wrong. She could not put her finger on it, but the whole situation was a mess.

Looking over to her seat, Lucy saw Antoinette and Duke Perry had returned. But before she could walk over she felt Clara tug insistently on her sleeve.

“Come, let us sit with your mother a while. She seems to want you back with her,” Clara said.

Looking over to where Clara had been seated, Lucy saw an empty seat either side of Edmund. To the other side of one of the empty seats were Lord and Lady Fitz. Lady Fitzgerald's eyes were fixed on her daughter somewhat apologetically. Lucy looked from Antoinette to her mother. She wanted to sit with Antoinette. But Antoinette would be understanding if she sat with her family. Whereas her mother would take it as a personal insult should she sit with Antoinette.

She nodded and made her way over to the seats, smiling to her mother to reassure her that no offence had been taken.

Sitting between her father and Edmund, Lucy felt pangs of guilt. How could she let Clara continue to lie to this good young man? But would he not be more hurt to discover the lie?

Antoinette had said that so long as nobody found out and they did not repeat their indecency, nobody had been hurt. But Clara had just confessed she was still in love with Lord Jones. And it was quite likely he was still in love with her too. If they had not been able to keep apart for a few months, would Clara really be able to abstain for the

rest of her life?

It was quite likely that they would repeat their indecency. They would do it again before the wedding, that was for sure. And once Clara was married... would they do it then also? Lucy already knew that Lord Jones had no respect for marriage, so would he respect Clara and Edmund's vows? It was bound to fall apart eventually.

It was too much. Perhaps if she confessed it herself, the weight would be off her chest? And yet she could not bring herself to. She could not tell anyone, not even a member of the clergy. What if the pastor who listened to her confession was the same one to conduct Clara and Edmund's wedding? What if he advised her to tell Edmund? Lucy was not sure she could handle the burden of correcting her own sins.

Some nun she would make.

She watched Clara and Edmund talking and laughing together. If all marriages were just political shams anyway, then she would fix nothing by telling anyone. And if they were not, she would break Edmund's heart. She would never get Andrew either way. What was the point?

Chapter 27

She could not stay for all of dinner. She was just feeling sick. How could Clara sit there and laugh and talk sweetly with Edmund, when barely two hours ago she had been in Lord Jones's arms? When she had admitted she still loved and desired the man she had once been engaged to marry? When she would almost certainly repeat her behaviour?

All Lucy wanted was to tell Edmund. To let him know that Clara was being dishonest and disloyal. But how could she? She had no place ruining three lives. And she did not even know Edmund. Perhaps he was the sort of man who married for status and power, and did not care about what she did so long as she furthered his interests?

Lucy could not just sit and watch the charade take place, whatever the case. Apologizing, she stood up and left the room. They could sit and laugh and pretend all was well in the world. She would have no part in it.

She made her way towards the gardens. It would be a much more pleasant thing to do than stay inside. Perhaps a little fresh air would do her some good, too. And maybe there would still be a few flowers which had not yet perished.

But as she neared the conservatory doors, she felt a tug on her wrist. Clara had caught up with her and was holding onto her, refusing to let go. “Let's go back to lunch,” she said.

Lucy shook her head. “I feel ill. I would much rather walk outside a while.”

“You really should not,” Clara insisted. “Things happen out there that you would rather not see. Stay with us and talk.” There was a slight desperation in Clara's voice, a slight tension in the hand which gripped Lucy's wrist.

Lucy pulled her wrist free. “Just let me be,” she said. “I have had enough of you, and Lord Jones, and everyone who is in any way like you. You sicken me. Now, if you excuse me, I shall go for a walk in

peace."

She marched through the conservatory and out into the top of the garden. The cool fresh air hit her and she felt instantly more alive. The sun was shining lightly through the thick clouds, in long golden strands reaching from heaven to earth, as though it were just another type of rain.

A few flowers must still have been strong, as with the damp rainwater their scent had been driven up into the air and the garden smelled so romantically sweet, Lucy felt almost lost in it. This was what she needed to help her relax.

Looking down over the garden, Lucy then realised what Clara had not wanted her to see. Lord Andrew Jones was there. And he was not alone. He was walking beside a lady. Lucy wondered who it could possibly be, especially considering that Clara was still behind her, up and indoors. She began to slowly step down the garden, wanting to get just close enough to see, but not so close as to draw attention to herself.

She needn't have been so careful. The two were completely lost in conversation, speaking quietly and gently to one another, laughing a little here and there. Then Lucy caught a glimpse of the woman's face. It was Princess Elisaveta. She had her hand on Lord Jones's arm as they walked and talked in the garden, surrounded by the last flowers of summer, bathed in rays of sunlight.

Lucy tried to calm herself down. They were friends. It meant nothing. After all, what would a princess want with a Baron? Even a European princess was much closer to a Duchess than anything resembling Lord Jones, or even Lucy herself. She smiled and nodded to herself. They were just two friends going on a walk together.

But the laughter bothered her. There was an intimate, almost conspiratorial quality to it. And those whispering voices... Lucy needed to know what they were saying. What was so funny, so secret, so exciting. She was about to interrupt them and join the conversation, stepping a little closer, opening her mouth to call out to them.

Then Lord Jones kissed Princess Elisaveta on the cheek. The Princess kissed his cheek back. It was nothing big. Nothing overt. Nothing sensual. But it made Lucy boil with rage. She had loved this man. She had respected him. And he had turned out to be the very sort of man she despised, the sort of man she had once assumed Duke Perry to be. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that she *still* loved

and respected the man she thought he was.

She yearned for him, for the Lord Jones that did not exist, that had never existed. She wanted to be by his side, to taste his lips, to talk to him about all that was wrong with the world. And she could not. Because *he* was what was wrong with the world.

Lucy turned around on her heels and, as swiftly and silently as she had crept out and down the garden, she crept back into the conservatory, shutting the door behind her. Clara Neal was waiting there for her. Lucy made eye contact with Clara, glared at her to make sure she knew she was not welcome, then stomped her feet on the mat to loosen any dirt. Clara shrugged. Lucy began to make her way past Clara to get back to the dining room, pushing Clara's shoulder with her own as she tried to get out. Clara did not move.

“I told you that you would not want to see that,” Clara said, shaking her head.

“Well I have now,” Lucy replied.

“This is part of the reason why I could not marry him, Lucy. He was away in India so much... I just knew that he would be laying with other women while he was out there. It is just what men do when left to their own devices. And now we have our proof. A princess too, lucky sod.” Clara walked over to the conservatory window, brushing shoulders harshly with Lucy. “I bet he'll reconsider his angle on marriage now, won't he? Now he has a chance of becoming royalty. By association, of course. But nevertheless, she is a worthy wife.”

Lucy shook her head. “He's committed to never marrying.”

“Or maybe committed to never marrying you?” Clara asked. “He was going to marry me. He was only against marriage because he had not recovered. But there's nothing like status to make a man recover from rejection. You were just not good enough.”

“Clara, do not continue talking of such unpleasant matters,” Lucy warned.

“But I'm right, am I not? Come to think of it, isn't this the second time you've lost a man to status? Duke Perry was engaged to you before the Duchy, to Duchess Antoinette after. Makes you think, does it not? How many more men will play the same mean tricks on you?” Clara continued.

Lucy felt her anger rising and rising. She did not blame Duke Perry. She had moved beyond that. And she was not going to sit there and let

someone say all men would turn against her. Of course not all men were two-faced, wicked, womanising beasts. It just so happened that this one was. Of all the men she had suspected, all the men she had turned down, *one* had turned out to be what she feared. And it just so happened he was the one she had put her faith in.

“It's a good thing you're becoming a nun, really,” Clara mused, moving away from the window and walking back up to Lucy. “I don't really think any man would take you for who you are. I mean... with how you look, and that attitude, what self-respecting man would want you? You're basically a man yourself. Or a brute, pure and simple.”

Lucy growled. So Clara thought she was masculine, did she? Clara thought she was a brute? Very well, she shall be a brute.

Lifting her hand and closing the last step between them, Lucy brought the palm of her hand down hard across Clara's face. A satisfying slap rang out against the glass walls of the conservatory. Clara let out a stunned squeaking sound and lifted her hand to her face. Lucy glared at her, as the red mark spread across Clara's cheek.

“I cannot believe you did that,” Clara said. “You really are an uncivilized brute, aren't you?”

Lucy shrugged. She spied a glass of red wine which Clara had abandoned on the conservatory table and picked it up. She took a slight sip of it, standing between Clara and the doorway.

“That is my drink,” Clara said.

Lucy shrugged again and with a flick of her wrist ejected the remaining wine right into Clara's face. The red droplets streaked her makeup, hung in her golden hair, and stained the white accents on her dress. Clara let out another indignant sound.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked. “All I did was tell the truth.”

Lucy sighed wearily. She did not care what Clara thought she was doing. She did not care if Clara jumped off a bridge. Come to think of it, she wasn't surprised that Clara and Lord Jones were still in love. They were cut from the same cloth.

“I'm going home,” Lucy said bluntly, turning around and walking out of the conservatory.

She didn't bother going back to the dining room. If she had forgotten anything, her mother or Antoinette would be sure to find it. Lady Fitzgerald would probably be indignant that she had not said her proper farewells and collected her things and excused herself to

everyone there. But Lucy did not care anymore. She just wanted to go home, somewhere safe and warm and pleasant where she could relax and probably cry for half an hour.

Lucy knew that she needed to get away from them. From Lord Jones, from Clara, from everything. They would probably get away of their own accord if only she gave them enough time. But it was not enough. She needed to hide away and wait. Or to go to that convent. Or just to go back to boarding school. It would involve a significant step down the social ladder, but it would be much better to be a teacher somewhere in the Devon countryside than a victim among high society.

Arriving home, she made her way upstairs and, not having found a servant to help her, proceeded to half rip herself out of her dress, discarding it on the ground, ribbons and several buttons torn, before getting into her night clothes. It was early in the day. But she was taking ill. She lay face down on the bed and began to cry.

She wasn't even sure what she was crying about. She just knew that she needed to.



She must have fallen asleep because she was awoken by the sound of someone knocking on her bedroom door. She sat up and ruffled her hair. “Who is it?” she asked.

“It is your mother, thank goodness you are here,” Lady Fitzgerald said, pushing the door open and walking in. “Why are you undressed?”

Lucy shrugged. “I am feeling very unwell, so I came home to rest.”

“*You* are feeling unwell? You have not had the news I just had back at the reception,” Lady Fitzgerald said, marching over to the bed and collapsing into the chair beside it, sitting on top of Lucy's torn dress.

“Whatever do you mean?” Lucy asked, hopeful for some exciting news.

“I have heard some things and I... I believe it would be for the better that you move to the convent now,” her mother said.

Lucy nodded. “I am in some agreement on that, though probably not for the same reasons,” she replied. “What have you heard?”

“It is too awful... it does not bear repeating,” Lady Fitzgerald said.

“If you do not tell me then how am I supposed to know what you are referring to?” Lucy said with a slight laugh.

Lady Fitzgerald glared. “Oh, I trust you know exactly what I am referring to.”

“Does it... Does it concern me personally?” Lucy asked.

“Of course it does. I would not be making this choice if it were not about what you have done,” Lady Fitzgerald replied.

“I am still not much the wiser,” Lucy said, shaking her head. Could her mother not just tell her? Wouldn't it be much simpler? She collapsed back in the bed. “If you will not tell me what this is about, I would like to sleep. I am very ill.”

“Nonsense. You are not ill. Clara told me all about it,” Lady Fitzgerald insisted.

“Wait, Clara told you?” Lucy asked, turning her head sharply to the side. “She told you everything?”

Lady Fitzgerald wiped a small tear from the corner of her eye. “Yes, she did. And I must say it is awful. All of that happening in Lord Jones's house. It's a disgrace, is what it is. I can hardly believe it...”

“And she told you *everything*?” Lucy asked again, still incredulous.

“Every last bit. I asked her to spare me some of the details but she insisted it was important for me to know,” Lady Fitzgerald said. “I suppose she was right, but that does not make it any easier to hear.”

“Well, that's a relief, to be fair,” Lucy replied. “I would not have liked to have told you myself. But I do not see what it has to do with me or the convent.”

“If you think I'm going to let you stay here and live under my roof, just so that you can go about acting like some cheap hussy, you are out of your mind,” Lady Fitzgerald said indignantly. “I cannot believe you are being so relaxed about this.”

“Well, it is not my fault what Clara and Lord Jones do,” Lucy replied.

“I am not talking about Clara, I am talking about you and Lord Jones, sinning under his very roof, escaping so you can commit such indecencies in private.” Lady Fitzgerald rubbed her temples. “I cannot believe my own daughter is doing such things.”

“I beg your pardon?” she asked, completely confused. “I never did any such thing. In fact—”

“Do not lie to me,” her mother spat back. “You keep lying to me. Like I will never find out, like it doesn't matter what you say. After all, I am only your mother. Well I have had enough of your insolence and your rebellion. You might think you are outsmarting me, but you shall not. At least I can trust decent young women like Clara to look out for the virtue you will not protect.”

Lucy now realised what had happened. In order to protect herself and exact her revenge, Clara had levied the same accusation against her. She was not sure exactly how this had been phrased, but from the sound of it Clara had accused Lucy of much more than she herself had done with Lord Jones.

Lucy shook her head. “Please do not believe that, mother. It is all lies. Clara wants to defame me.”

“Why would an upstanding young woman like Clara, with a fiancé and all her life ahead of her, waste her time insulting a girl like you?” Lady Fitzgerald countered. “She says that when she tried to persuade you not to spend any more time with Lord Jones you cast wine in her face, like some sort of petulant child.”

“I did nothing indecent, you have to believe me,” Lucy said. She wanted so desperately to tell her mother the truth. But it was not right. But... Clara had been willing to ruin *her* life over this. So why was she still barred from ruining Clara's? No, an eye for an eye made perfect sense in this case.

“I cannot believe my daughter is such a hussy,” her mother said, tears flowing from her eyes freely now.

“But it was not me who did that!” Lucy exclaimed. “It was Clara. *I* caught *her* kissing Lord Jones, not the other way around!”

Lady Fitzgerald looked personally insulted by the accusation. “Lucy! Clara is a decent young lady. And if you will speak ill of her when all she has done is try to save you, then... I am not sure a convent is the right choice for you. I am not sure where you belong,” Lady Fitzgerald replied. “I cannot sit here with you. I would like you to stay in your room for the remainder of the day and think about what you have done.

Chapter 28

As Lady Fitzgerald left the room, Lucy felt an ominous sense take over her. This was not going to end well. There was no punishment she could even imagine that her mother would consider enough. She could not even work out what exactly Clara had accused her of, only that she had made that accusation in great detail. It could be any number of obscenities. Most likely obscenities which Clara herself had an intimate, carnal knowledge of...

This could not be happening. Lucy threw herself back down on her bed. She should never have attacked Clara. In doing so she had joined a game she had no chance of winning. She had always known, from things her mother had told her, and from her mother's frets about class and status, that there was an amount of vindictiveness in high society. Part and parcel of having wealth and status was needing to defend your honour. And Lucy had attacked the honour of an admired and respected young woman. She was doomed to be attacked now. And who would believe her over Clara?

She needed to turn to someone. To anyone. But to who? After all, she was not even allowed out now. And she could not invite Lord Jones around to confirm her version of events. He probably would not anyway. He would probably either back Clara up and boast of his conquest, or deny it entirely and make Lucy look even guiltier by association.

Lucy wondered whether Antoinette would be able to defend her. But Antoinette knew only what Lucy had told her, and was too honest to support her any further than that. No, it all came down to Clara's word against Lucy's. And if Lucy's own mother would not believe her, then who else would? She had nothing and nobody to support her, and now she would have to face the consequences of insulting a powerful and vindictive young woman.

She was despairing. She could not afford the problems this lie was going to cause her. Or... could she? Her mother was just thinking of sending her to a convent, after all. And that was where she wished to be anyway. Of course Lady Fitzgerald had claimed that Lucy would

not be fit for a convent, but it was possible that they would permit her to enter. She would have to repent for something she never did, though...

And she was not exactly sold on the concepts of confession and repentance anyway. She couldn't help but wonder whether God cared if you told anyone, if you tried to feel bad about it, if you said a few prayers. He probably just didn't want you to commit the sin in the first place, and would be happier if you don't repent, but never sin again than He would be if you kept on sinning and repenting. Sins, after all, were not mud stains. They would not come out in the wash.

Lucy wondered where she would be sent in the end. If not the nunnery, then where could she go? She didn't really want to go anywhere. She wanted to just stay there...

The door swung open again. Lucy sat bolt upright, seeing her mother standing there. Apparently she did not deserve the common courtesy of knocking anymore. That was reserved for good girls, like Clara.

“Your father and I are going to speak with you, and we shall determine what is the best course of action for you,” she said bluntly.

Lucy just nodded. What else could she say or do? There was no arguing with her mother. Perhaps her father would be more sympathetic to her plight...

Lucy put on a bed coat to cover her nightie and found some slippers to keep her feet warm. She did not feel ready to get dressed again yet. She would just be back in her room, in bed, crying again after this, wouldn't she?

Her father, sat in his favourite armchair in front of the fire, looked somewhere between furious and heartbroken. All she wanted to do was hug him and beg for his forgiveness. But forgiveness for what? She had done nothing wrong.

She considered sitting down on the sofa, but knew her mother would then sit beside her. She did not want that. They were against her. She sat down in another armchair and avoided making eye contact with them.

“Lucy, your mother has told me some of what Clara said to her... is it true?” her father asked.

Lucy shook her head earnestly. “I promise that it is not.”

“Lucy... why would anyone claim to have seen something like that? What was actually happening in that room?” he asked her.

“Nothing. Well, not nothing. Clara and Lord Jones were... were kissing in the room. But nothing else. And nothing between him and I,” Lucy explained.

“I am not sure I can believe that, Lucy, it sounds as though you are trying to pass the blame onto someone else,” her father replied.

“Please, you have to believe me. Clara is trying to ruin my reputation,” Lucy insisted.

“And why would Clara, a young woman with so much in her favour, attack you?” Lord Fitzgerald asked.

“Because I caught her. And I promised her I would not tell a soul. But then she started saying such vicious things to me about the men who have rejected me, and made me feel so worthless... so I threw wine over her. And I suppose that made her angry,” Lucy admitted.

Lady Fitzgerald shook her head. “Clara told me you threw wine at her when she confronted you over what she had seen in that room.”

“Clara is lying!” Lucy shouted in frustration. “She is just trying to hurt me and you are both valuing her word above mine.”

“Because Clara has proven herself to be an upstanding young lady. You, on the other hand, lie to us, disobey us, and dishonour yourself regularly. Who are we supposed to believe?” Lady Fitzgerald replied.

“Your daughter,” Lucy said, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Now, dear, don't cry, we're just trying to get to the bottom of what happened,” Lord Fitzgerald said, standing up and resting a reassuringly heavy hand on her shoulder.

Lucy sniffled. She just wanted to go back to her room and cry in peace. “It all happened as I said,” she insisted.

“I am not sure I can believe all that. Lucy, Clara has so much. She is pretty, and engaged to be married, and well connected. She was even once engaged to Lord Jones... are you sure you are not jealous?” Lord Fitzgerald asked.

“Of course not!” Lucy replied. Then she paused. But she *was* jealous, wasn't she? Just because the jealousy was not behind her words did not mean she was not jealous. Clara had it all. And Lucy... Lucy did not. She averted her gaze and remained silent.

“I thought so,” her father replied, moving back to his chair. “But Lucy, what Clara did was for your own good. She is protecting your virtue. If you still have it.”

“I do,” Lucy replied quietly. This was beyond her control. A well-respected, beautiful, well-spoken young woman like Clara would always seem more important than a rough little nobody like Lucy herself.

Lord Fitzgerald nodded. “That is good news. I am sure that the nuns will be pleased to know that you are not coming to them as a ruined woman.”

Ruined. Lucy found the word ridiculous. As if that one little change would make the whole world of difference. If she was not ruined, then that one little act would not destroy her beyond repair. And if she was to be ruined, she did not need to commit any further sins: she had already done quite enough to ruin herself as it was.

Lucy nodded. “If the convent will have me, I shall repent and I shall join them,” she agreed.

“That is wonderful to hear,” her father said with a smile. “You will do well there. It is a more familiar environment for you, and you shall be away from temptation, always in the eyes of God.”

Lucy forced out a meek smile in return. What did it matter the reason? She was finally going away to the convent, like she had wanted all along. She would be away from people like Clara and Lord Jones. Away from temptation, as her father had so accurately phrased it. Namely the temptation to continue to slap and throw wine on them until they were red from head to toe...

She stood up and curtsied. “Shall I pack my bags?”

Lord Fitzgerald closed his eyes, smiled, and nodded.

Lucy made her way upstairs, her heart beating hard, her chest and head tense with anxiety. But she did not understand why. There was nothing more to it. She was going to do this anyway, only now she needed to do it before her reputation was completely destroyed and her parents were hurt.

If she waited too long, Clara might spread more rumours about her. Or she might be tricked by another man. At least she would not let herself be tricked by the scoundrel Lord Jones again... On the other hand, if she left that very night perhaps her friends and family would defend her honour. As a nun, people like Clara would not dare say anything against her, as the church would be implicated. She would be safe and her parents' reputation would be intact.

Packing her bags, she wondered whether she could see any of her

friends before going there. It was all feeling so rushed, she just wanted to slow down for a moment and talk it through with someone.

She heard another knock at the door. “It's your mother,” came the voice. Apparently now that she had committed to a more respectable life she was entitled to a knock again. “Come in,” Lucy said.

“How is the packing going?” Lady Fitzgerald asked as she walked into the room.

“I am not sure what I shall need,” Lucy replied. “Probably not a lot. Nuns do not wear gowns, or jewellery, and I doubt that they use perfumes and read romance novels.” She sighed.

Lady Fitzgerald hugged her daughter. “It is for the best. If you cannot control yourself around Lord Jones, you are bound to end up doing something you shall regret. And if you will not marry, then those desires will be completely unaddressed. It is a disaster waiting to happen.”

Lucy nodded. “I understand. I just wish I could go and see a few friends before leaving,” she replied.

“Of course, you can see anyone you like,” Lady Fitzgerald said warmly.

But Lucy knew full well that someone was off limits. Not that it mattered. She did not want to see him anyway. “I am not sure who to pick to see first,” Lucy said.

“How about Clara? I know you are angry at her, but maybe you ought to thank her for saving you,” Lady Fitzgerald said.

Lucy shook her head immediately. “Perhaps you can thank her on my behalf. I am sure she is busy, and still angry at me over the wine.”

“I will, I will,” Lady Fitzgerald replied, sounding somewhat annoyed that her suggestion had not been accepted.

Lucy felt like rolling her eyes. Since when was Clara Neal everyone's little darling? She was a pretty and popular young lady, but hardly the saint her parents seem to have decided that she was. No, she wanted her last hours in general society to count for something.

She briefly contemplated seeing the Princess. But she was not sure of how to get to see her unless she had been invited. Besides, what good would it do? If Lord Jones was courting the Princess, then warning her might be perceived as an insult. And if he was not, then the warning would be an even greater insult, not to mention humiliating. After all,

in Europe they did things differently. Perhaps Lord Jones had finally met his perfect match: a woman from a country that no longer believed in marriage.

No, she knew exactly who she needed to see. Her very best friend. The one person who had remained by her side through everything, who believed and trusted her, who showed her love and respect...

If she was even at her local mansion, and not miles away in Devonshire, that is.

Chapter 29

Lucy felt a sense of relief as she walked into Antoinette's house. “Thank goodness you are still here!” she exclaimed as she was guided into the drawing room to see her friend.

Antoinette stood up and walked over to Lucy, planting a kiss on her cheek. “To what do I owe this lovely surprise?” she asked.

“Well, it's not good news. Or, I suppose, bad news either,” Lucy replied. “My parents have decided I ought to go to the convent sooner rather than later.”

“So you really are going, then?” Antoinette asked, sounding a little heavy hearted. “I had been hoping you may find another way around this. Or that you might have waited and met a man suitable for you to marry.”

“I would rather have more time too,” Lucy replied. “But it does not look as though that is an option.”

“I know,” Antoinette replied, walking with her friend to the sofa and sitting down.

“You do?” Lucy asked, sitting down beside Antoinette and putting her head to one side.

“I just... I know why your parents are trying to send you sooner,” Antoinette replied. “I was one of the first people Clara tried telling. She seemed to think I would not want to socialize with you anymore if I believed you had ruined yourself.”

“Oh...” Lucy couldn't think of anything else to say.

“Then she went to your mother, so after hearing the news, I put two and two together and assumed she probably told your parents what she had told me, and now they are more desperate than ever to send you to the convent. Am I correct?” Antoinette asked.

Lucy nodded. “You are. What is it, exactly, that she accused me of?”

Antoinette shook her head. “I will not repeat such things. Suffice it to

say, she accused you of *everything*."

Lucy may have not had the experiences she was accused of. But she was not naïve either. She grimaced, nodded, then sighed. "But why didn't you defend me?" she asked. She felt her heart ache sorely.

"I could not. I did not think she would say such vile things to your parents. I just assumed she would give up after she could not get through to me," Antoinette replied.

"But when she was saying these things to you... what did you say?" Lucy asked.

"I said I did not care what you did do or did not do, only that you were a good friend and a good person," Antoinette replied.

Lucy scowled. "You could have defended my honour."

"I could not. I was not there. I could not defend your honour in that situation any more than I could defend hers when you told me what you had seen," Antoinette replied. "When one is in a position such as I am, one cannot afford to spread or deny rumours. As a Duchess I have to be above it all entirely, and completely impartial."

Lucy nodded, feeling a little less defensive. "I understand. I suppose these matters are never simple."

"They are not," Antoinette replied. "It can be an absolute nightmare, if I am quite honest. You cannot say one thing to one person, but you *have* to say it to another, you cannot confirm or deny anything you did not directly witness... I suppose it holds the fabric of society together, but it is a lot of work for one person."

Lucy sighed wearily. "I understand. Forgive me for getting angry at you."

"I was not sure you would have wanted to be defended anyway," Antoinette said. "You usually seem quite content to live with a poor reputation."

Lucy hesitated. "I suppose... but normally my poor reputation is my own fault, and is true. It's different when someone else is in control."

"I understand, but at least you will not be here to live with it," Antoinette replied.

"Most true. I shall not miss the gossip and the wickedness here." Suddenly, Lucy felt her heart grow heavier. "But I shall miss you."

Antoinette embraced Lucy closely and kissed her cheek. "I shall miss

you too."

Lucy knew that of everyone, the only person she would truly miss every day would be Antoinette. She had been the only person Lucy had missed during her stay in boarding school, and she was the only one who she still loved having returned. The only real person, at any rate.

"You did not tell me we were expecting guests," a man said from behind them.

Lucy turned around to see Antoinette's brother, Thomas, in the doorway.

"We were not. She just dropped by. And you need to get ready to set off for your honeymoon," Antoinette replied.

He nodded. "I do, I do, but I was just curious as to who had come to see us."

As Thomas walked in, Antoinette stood up, walked over to him, and kissed his cheek. He kissed her back. Lucy blinked and stared. All this cheek kissing was starting to confuse her. It struck her that nobody used to do it much at all, and now everyone seemed to be doing it.

"What is that about?" Lucy asked.

"What is what?" Thomas asked, walking in and sitting down on an empty chair.

"The kissing. The cheek kissing. Nobody used to ever do that," Lucy explained, putting her head to one side.

"Oh, that? Her Highness Elisaveta does it," Antoinette remarked. "Some sweet little habit from Europe."

"What does it mean?" Lucy asked.

Antoinette shrugged as she sat down beside Lucy. "It doesn't mean anything. It is a kiss."

"But... I always assumed kisses were between lovers, or parents and children," she said. "It is a little rare for everyone to be kissing suddenly."

"I suppose it is just pleasant to greet people with a kiss," Thomas replied. "I hadn't given it much thought, to be honest. My sister started doing it and I took it for granted."

Lucy nodded. "I suppose trends change. Is it only used for greeting?"

Antoinette shook her head. “No, I do not understand all the norms, but Her Highness kisses for greetings, farewells, and when an agreement is reached. A few other occasions, but it is not a simple matter.”

She was a little confused now. So Lord Jones and the Princess were not intimate? That kiss had just been some sort of greeting, or formal acknowledgement of what they were saying. A strange European habit, but something innocent, nonetheless. He was not quite as terrible as she had assumed. He was not running around wooing random women left and right. She had placed entirely too many sins on him.

Lucy felt a pang of guilt as she realised she had blamed him for something which he had not been guilty of.

Nevertheless, he was still in love with Clara Neal. And that would not do.

Even if he was not a womanizer, even if he was a good man who would devote himself to one woman for life, he was against marriage, and that one woman was Clara, not Lucy. She could not continue to hold a candle for someone who did not think her important enough to marry her.

She had to leave for the convent before she started giving him entirely too many excuses. Otherwise she might end up falling in love with him again, and ruining her life for good.



Lucy awoke as the coach drew to a jerky halt. The journey had been over a week long, including stops to refresh the horses and get a good night's sleep. The maid and footman which had accompanied her were weary and eager to have a proper bath and a nice big meal.

But all Lucy could think of was how her life was about to change, to veer off into the unknown. The sun was barely breaking the horizon, but they were there. Emerging from the coach in a bit of a daze, Lucy was surprised by the sharp, salty wind that shook her hair loose from her bonnet. Still fairly short despite several weeks of growth, it whipped in the wind and she could feel the coldness of the air all over her scalp.

The maid caught the bonnet and handed it to Lucy as the footman took her meagre luggage from the coach and asked the driver to get

two rooms at the local inn and then return for them a few hours later, when Lucy had been settled in.

Lucy looked around, taking in the tall grass on the tiny hills, the sheep grazing in the fields so far in the distance that they looked like little specks of dust on the green, and the small, stone buildings, damp with sea spray and green with moss and lichen. It was a shocking change from the deeper hills and flats, the abundant trees, and the countless small fields and farms in the Midlands. The smells, the sounds, the sights were all from another world entirely.

She turned around and looked at the blue horizon where the sky met the water. The village had been built right on the edge of the cliff and the beach, overlooking the vast ocean. To the left of her Lucy could see the road to the beach, paved with huge cut stones, dusted with sand, hedgerows and stone walls blocking it off from the largely unused fields at either side of it. To the right of her she could see the scraggy grass growing up the cliff, and the winding road they had just descended.

Before her she could see the sea, and behind her was the village and England, stretching into the distance. It was a world apart from anything she had ever known. She was in the middle of so much strangeness.

The convent was much further back inland, but the horses needed feeding and the family coach was not quite equipped for that journey. Lucy would need to hire a coach to make it there. Her footman and maid would accompany her, but once she was in the convent and the luggage was unloaded, she would be on her own until her parents chose to visit her.

It did not take long before the footman found a suitable coach for hire and loaded her few bags onto it. They began their journey back into the fields, away from the crashing waves, the screeching gulls, and the dusty, sandy stone road.

It took only a few minutes from when the village vanished to when the convent appeared.

Lucy was in awe of the place. It was not majestic in the same way as the Princess's castle was, but it was nothing like boarding school either. It looked vast and rugged, like the medieval castles depicted in fairytale books, or ghost stories. The stone slabs it was cut from were at least four foot by four foot, and had been worn so smooth that they almost looked like they were one solid surface, which God had purposefully shaped into a castle. The windows were narrow, and the

huge wooden door looked as though it had recently been repaired, standing out from the rest of the building by how clean and undamaged it was.

Lucy was guided in by the maid and sat down in the hallway. A nun showed the footman where Lucy would be staying. She just sat and watched as the maid, footman, and nun took their time sorting affairs. Having shook Lucy's hand and wished her well, the maid retreated to the coach. The footman left wordlessly, obviously tired and ready for his meal at the inn.

And then there was Lucy.

She stood up and walked over to the narrow window by the door, peering out as the footman disappeared into the coach and it shakily bounced down the path, towards the village whose tiny roofs were barely visible in the distance. Seeing the footman depart was bittersweet to her. On the one hand, she barely knew him, but on the other he was the representation of the last of her old life rolling down the hill.

From now on everything changed. She did not have much with her, only a few changes of undergarments and a couple of plain Sunday dresses, some toiletries, and a box of letter writing equipment, to stay in touch with her parents with. But even that had vanished into a room somewhere. All she could do was sit down and wait and hope for the nun to return. They held power over her life now, just as her parents had done before, and her teachers before that.

It was not the life she would have chosen for herself. But it was the life fate had chosen for her. At least now her life would have direction, and purpose. At least now she would not need to fear the consequences of her own foolish actions and uninformed judgements. And at least now she would not be tempted by the rich aroma of Lord Jones's cologne, or the softness of his lips... Lucy sighed and wiped a tear away from her cheek.

The nun emerged again. She was a plump woman in her mid-fifties, with soft, sun-stained skin and slightly milky blue eyes. Her lips were full but lacking colour. Her whole expression was maternal and soothing. She smiled warmly. “Oh dear, are you sad?” she asked, with genuine love in her voice.

Lucy wanted to lie and say everything was alright. But lying was hardly a good start to a Godly life. She nodded.

“It can be difficult, what are you concerned about?” She sat down beside Lucy and enveloped her in a reassuring arm. “I am Sister

Elisabeth, and it will be my job to accompany you as you become a Sister alongside us."

"I am afraid I shall regret it, Sister," Lucy replied. "Every decision I have made in my life has been so foolish. And this is the last decision I will make for myself. But what if that is also foolish?"

Sister Elisabeth shook her head. "No, it is not so. God directs us in all that we do. And He would not let you make a decision that was foolish. Even if your past decisions have felt foolish at first, they are all guiding you towards the life you truly ought to lead. They have led you here, now, so here and now is where you ought to be."

Lucy nodded. "I suppose you are right. It is comforting to think that all I have done, however contradictory, may have been for a reason. It is still a big change from how I used to live."

"We do not concern ourselves with where we come from, but with who we are today. You will soon get used to this," Sister Elisabeth said reassuringly. "It is a shock to most of us, but you know your calling when you see it."

Lucy nodded and smiled. "I would like to go to my room for now," she said.

"Very well," Sister Elisabeth replied. "Normally we share rooms with four or five other Sisters, but we feel that sometimes new arrivals need some time to themselves, to adapt and get to know their new friends."

Lucy just nodded again. Really, she was not sure what she wanted. She was not sure she wanted to be alone at all, but Sister Elisabeth was right in that she did not know anyone yet. She would just go along with whatever happened, and see where life guided her.

That night she curled up in her bed and wept for several hours. She was not ready for this. She could not do this. But she had no choice anymore.

Andrew had been right, back when he had warned her away from this. She would never adapt.

Chapter 30

The next morning she was awoken before the sun rose. She began to get dressed, wondering if she could ever get used to this black curtain she was expected to wear for a dress. The little white veil on her head felt odd too. She may not have been too keen on the fancy, elaborate, impractical clothes that other girls wore. She was much more used to the lightness and ease of movement of her school clothes. But that did not mean she eschewed style entirely. She loved bright colours, soft ribbon and lace, and sparkling jewels. She loved feeling girly. But what was the point of looking and feeling girly when she was going to spend her life as a sexless, pious woman?

The day began with prayer before breakfast. The thought struck her that she had rarely prayed since leaving school. Along with having her heart broken by Duke Perry, her very spirit had been scarred. She had lost her faith in love, marriage, humanity, and God. Nothing had been right in her world since then. She had nothing to ask for because she hoped for nothing. She had nothing to be thankful for because she loved nothing.

But now, kneeling in front of the pulpit, hearing Mother ask them to be thankful, to be grateful, to ask for better in the world, she realised how much she had to be thankful for, even back home, even now. She was young, and healthy, and wise, and safe. She had food and clothes and people who protected her. And the world had so little in comparison...

Eating her meal, it tasted a little plain, but was ultimately warmly satisfying. It was not what she was used to. It was not rich with fats, sugars, and spices. But the texture of the porridge was just right, and the little spoonful of jam in the middle added just enough flavour without masking the smooth earthiness of the oats. There was not as much of it as she would have expected at home either, but she found it pleasant to have no food left on her plate at the end of the meal, still feeling full despite the lack of excess.

Chores were a new thing for her. She felt utterly inept as she seized the knife and carefully began peeling potatoes. Most people did this

every day of their lives, from early childhood until their fingers were seizing with rheumatism. And yet she, even with her beautiful penmanship and sewing skills, could not hold the knife properly. She had been groomed her whole life to be a good wife, not to be a good nun.

As her hand slipped and she cut her little finger almost to the bone, she let out a surprised and pained yelp. She wasn't even sure if it was enough to call to anyone's attention until Sister Elisabeth came to check on her and guided her to a small room where they kept some simple bandages and ointments.

“You daft girl,” Sister Elisabeth said warmly as she dabbed at Lucy's cut. “Always take care of yourself. This is the only body you are given. Respect it.” A head peered in as Sister Elisabeth reached for the bandages. “Hello Sister Veronica,” Sister Elisabeth said, “do you have anything to say?”

“Yes. Lucy, you have a visitor,” Sister Veronica said. “Shall I show her to the reception?”

Sister Elisabeth shook her head. “I shall show her there when she is bandaged. Please, return to your duties.”

Lucy felt her heart leap in excitement and joy. It had to be someone from back home. It was just what she needed. Someone to see her and tell her about home and ask how she was. It had only been a week since she left, though, so they must have been hot on her tail. Nevertheless, it would be nice to see a familiar face. And reassuring. She was thought of. She was loved. She was wanted.

But then a little fear rose its head... Perhaps it was not good news? For someone to follow so closely after her, without first sending a letter, it must be an urgent matter. She braced herself for it to go either way.

As soon as the bandage was attached firmly, Lucy followed Sister Elisabeth in the direction of the main door. She tried to retain the calm and steady step of a Sister, but she could feel a spring in her heel. It would be nice to see someone from home, and hopefully the news would be good.

Sister Elisabeth opened the door to the reception and held it open for Lucy. It seemed that she was not going to escort her in. Was this guest going to be a woman, then? Lucy nodded towards the door. Sister Elisabeth shook her head and smiled. Whatever the case, she was expected to meet her guest on her own.

Walking into the reception, a room not wholly unlike a library, Lucy

felt comfortable. The walls were an endless row of bookshelves, laden with worn, often-read tomes and wads of paper, without a single ornament. Two heavy sofas rested in the middle, and several chairs in the corners. Sitting with his back to her on one sofa was a man. This took Lucy a little by surprise.

Nevertheless, if she was to become a nun perhaps the usual conventions of separating the sexes did not apply. After all, what would a nun want with a man. She walked around the sofa to face her guest. Lord Andrew Jones jumped slightly.

“You were very quiet entering,” he said with a meek smile. “How do you do?”

All Lucy wanted to do was turn around and walk back out the room. His green eyes were piercing, invasive... sensual. He looked so dashing in his fitted suit and excessively bright red shirt. His face flushed so beautifully. He was temptation come to ruin her.

“I am sorry, I cannot speak to you,” she replied, turning around.

A hand seized her wrist gently. “Please, just allow me to talk with you a while.”

Lucy pulled her wrist free and walked to the window. “There is nothing to talk about,” she replied coldly.”

“Oh, but there is.” His voice sent shivers down her spine, it was so deep and rich, flowing through her mind like honey.

This was not who she had wanted to see. Especially not like this. Not so soon. Not alone. She should just walk out the door. But she was not strong enough against his temptation. She wanted to hear what he had to say. To spend more time in his company. To let him push her limits. To give him a chance... She should not. And yet she still stood there, looking out the window.

His footsteps on the carpet sounded like the gentle pad of a predator stalking its prey. He moved in close behind her. She shivered and the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. His breath was warm through the veil, barely reaching her skin. She felt her heart speed up.

“Lucy... I... I heard you were here, and I can only hope that there is time for you to reconsider,” Lord Jones said.

“There is not,” she replied as coldly as she could, trying to mask the excitement she felt at his proximity.

“You have already converted?” Lord Jones asked, a slight surprise on

his voice.

She could have lied to him. But she wanted to put lying behind herself. “No, but I am here now, where I belong.”

Lord Jones chuckled, sounding somewhere between relieved and amused. “It is not where you belong. And you know this as well as I do.”

“But this is for the best. For me, for my parents, for yourself…” Lucy insisted.

“How is it for the best? You have almost certainly already seen what the life of a nun entails. Do you think you could live like this, every day of your life, forever?” he asked.

“I can and I shall,” she replied.

Lord Jones sighed. “It will break you, you know?”

“As though you have not already broken me with your stupid words and sinful acts,” Lucy replied, turning around to face him.

He shook his head. “You seemed most keen to indulge when it suited you.”

“When I thought you loved me,” she replied.

“I do love you,” he said bluntly.

“You love Clara Neal, I saw it, she said as much… It is wrong, but it is no concern of mine what wrong you do with others, in your own time, in your own home,” she replied with a heavy sigh. “But I shall be no part of it.”

“And because Clara Neal said so, you shall trust her?” Lord Jones asked.

Lucy shook her head. “No, because I saw it.”

“You saw her forcing me to kiss her because she regretted ever leaving me. You saw her proposing that I be her lover, so that she can continue to have the marriage of her dreams *and* the man she loved, in some sort of adulterous contract,” Lord Jones replied.

Lucy felt her heart leap with anticipation. And yet… she could not trust him. “It is only your word against Clara's,” she said coldly.

“She has been saying a lot of things to a lot of people. Surely you would not trust a woman who lied to everyone else?” Lord Jones asked. “After all she said about you… would you trust what she said

about me?"

"I suppose I should not. But why should I trust you?" she asked.

"Because I have been nothing but honest with you," he replied.

"Except when Clara was at your home," she said, staring into his eyes.

He did not look away. "Because she was being ridiculous and I did not wish for either of you to be hurt."

"I am not sure what to believe anymore, but if you do not wish to marry, I can never see you again," Lucy insisted.

"Is that so?" Lord Jones said after a short pause. "The lack of marriage did not bother you before."

"I was thinking like a child before," she replied. "Now I am trying to think, and act, as a woman. And to do right in the eyes of God. I will not fall for the temptations which Clara gave in to."

"You sound convinced," he said.

"I am," she replied.

Looking into his beautiful eyes, Lucy felt her heart breaking. But it was what needed to be done. She could not continue to sin. And he would not make things right. There was no compromise to be found. Even if they continued to see one another on the same terms, she knew eventually she would be tempted to go beyond a kiss. And she doubted he would care for her once her body was off the table. It was better for everyone.

"I just find it so hard to believe, that someone so sweet and lovely... such as yourself, would make the choice to live a life without passion," he said.

She shook her head. "There is plenty of passion in faith," she replied.

"That is not the sort of passion to which I referred," he whispered, his deep voice driving another shiver down her spine.

Andrew stepped in closer, lifting a hand to pull the soft white head covering from her dark, short hair. Lucy tried to lift a hand to stop him, but found she could not. The hairs of her entire scalp stood on end as the veil dragged over them, leaving her head bare again.

"Much better," he remarked. "Your hair is lovely, you should not hide it."

She stayed still as his ran his fingers through her hair. It was wrong.

But it felt right. More than right. It felt perfect. He leaned in and inhaled the scent of her hair with an appreciative hum. He lifted her hand to his and held it. He looked down into her eyes and she looked up into his. She wanted him. She wanted him more than she had ever wanted anything or anyone.

His lips met hers. Her heart was melting. She pulled back, tears welling up in her eyes. “No… stop…” she whispered.

He stood upright and looked down at her mournfully. “Are you certain?” he asked. “Are you sure this is what you want? That you will not return, you shall not be by my side?”

“If you cannot marry me, I cannot be yours,” Lucy replied, her heart weighing down in her chest like a cart of bricks. Her tears began to escape, rolling down her cheeks.

He nodded. She could see tears in his eyes also. But it was what was needed. He would never marry anyone. His lack of commitment to Clara Neal meant nothing to her. She slipped her head covering back on, adjusting it gently, and wiped her tears away with the back of her hand.

“I think you ought to leave,” she said, “before I start having second thoughts and ruin my life for a man who will not have me in marriage.”

“I suppose that this is farewell,” he said solemnly.

She nodded. “It has to be. I cannot trust you, much less myself around you. We must never see one another again, if we are to lead godly lives.”

“I had been thinking of returning to India,” Lord Jones said with a far off note to his voice. “To continue the mission there, where it would be my job to save, not corrupt, young women.”

“That is a very noble idea,” she said, her heart aching sorely at the thought of all that ocean between them.

“It is for the best,” he said, echoing her. “But… if we shall never meet again… perhaps you can afford me one last kiss?”

Lucy nodded. “Very well, if you must insist.” She knew it was wrong. She knew she ought to know better. But she did not care. She was not a nun yet. If she could not have him, she would at least have one more kiss to remember him by.

His hands clasped her waist firmly and drew her in close. Her fingers

entwined in his hair. Their lips locked, sensually, lovingly, so tight she could feel his pulse through the kiss. For that brief moment, they were one.

Chapter 31

Seeing Lord Jones leave was worse than leaving her home behind. It was as though with that one kiss he had sucked her heart out through her mouth and carried it away with him. She wanted to chase after him. To beg for it back.

And yet she still felt a heart beating in her chest, too hard and fast for her to ignore it. If he had her heart... she remembered the tears in the corners of his eyes... then she must have his. She lifted her hand to her chest, feeling her heart beating hard enough for the both of them, both of their hearts in one single chest, lonely and yet exactly where they belonged.

She heard some gentle footsteps walking in behind her. She did not move. She could already tell who it was from the reassuring presence.

“An echo from the past?” Sister Elisabeth asked, squeezing Lucy's shoulder.

Lucy nodded. “A man I used to love,” she replied.

“Used to?” Sister Elisabeth pressed.

“And still do,” Lucy confessed. “How can I become a nun if I am still pining for the touch of a man.”

“We were all girls once,” Sister Elisabeth replied.

Lucy turned around. “Do you mean to say that you...? The other sisters...? Everyone?”

Sister Elisabeth nodded. “Yes. Some of us still feel love for those we have lost.”

“That sounds awful,” Lucy found herself saying.

“These things happen. Especially for those of us who convert after twenty. I had a few young men pursue me when I came here, believe it or not,” Sister Elisabeth said.

“But how do you cope? How do you go twenty, thirty, forty years

without a man you love?" she asked.

"For some of us it is impossible to return to them. They are married, or deceased, or all but gone," she began. "For others it is a process of discovering things which matter to us as much as love and romance do. We all have our own way of joining the order. And some never make it. Some return."

"Some nuns go back to their old lives?" Lucy asked.

"Of course they do. To be a nun after a normal life is too much for some. Those of us here consider ourselves to be widows to the men and lives we lost, and wives of Christ. But some women are not meant to be bonded to our Lord until they pass on. There is nothing wrong with that," Sister Elisabeth explained.

"But how do you know when it is time to stay or time to go?" Lucy replied, her heart heavier than ever.

"At the end of the day, we will always know in our heart of hearts what is right for us," Sister Elisabeth replied. "I shall leave you to think about it. It seems you are not as committed to this life as you need to be."

"I am not at all sure," Lucy replied with a sigh. "How do I know?"

"Do not think about it too much. Just follow your heart. Because that is where God is, and that is where He placed your purpose." Sister Elisabeth explained.

Lucy was not convinced. Because her mind told her that she was doing the right thing. But her heart of hearts cried out for Lord Jones. And she was not sure that she wanted to be alone. She wanted to have someone by her side, to keep her company and reassure her that she was doing the right thing.

"Please, do not go," Lucy asked. "I need someone by my side. Someone to let me know what I am doing or saying is right."

"My dear child, you do not need someone else to tell you that. The only right and wrong is what was determined to be your path by God. And the map of that path is within you, nobody else," Sister Elisabeth explained. "What do you think is right?"

"I... I think the right thing is to marry him," she said, tears welling up in her eyes. "But he will not marry."

"Not all men remain against marriage forever. Perhaps he will come back some time for you," Sister Elisabeth said.

Lucy shook her head. “I am worried that he shall never change his mind.”

“Could you marry someone else, knowing that perhaps he would change his mind?” Sister Elisabeth asked.

Lucy sighed. “I could not marry someone else even if I knew for sure that he would never return,” she confessed.

“Then you would do the right thing to be here, waiting, would you not? At least then you know you are well, and he would know where to find you. And, as I said, some younger Sisters are not truly prepared for a solemn vow, and return to common life. Some Sisters here believe they are wicked and sinful for doing so, but myself...” she paused and shook her head, “I believe that they are good of heart, and that God is calling them to a different path, a different mission. There is nothing wrong with another life, so long as it is according the God's plan.”

Lucy nodded. “I suppose, I do believe it is God's plan that we be together. Even if he does not.”

“Then by the grace of God, perhaps he shall be saved,” Sister Elisabeth replied, hugging Lucy warmly. “Until then, do what you feel is the right thing.” With one last reassuring squeeze of the shoulder, Sister Elisabeth walked back out the room, closing the door behind her, leaving Lucy on her own.

Lucy wondered why, after specifically asking not to be left alone, Sister Elisabeth had still walked out the door. Did she not see that Lucy still needed guidance, reassurance, help? Almost anyone else in Lucy's life up until that point would have stayed until she found a solution.

And that was the problem. Everyone was offering her so much help, she never had to think about anything for herself. She never had to make her own decision. Sister Elisabeth had told her that any path, so long as it was godly, would be fine. And then she had left. It was Lucy's job to choose that path. And the path she would rather take was... the one that led to Lord Jones.

Of course, perhaps he *would* change his mind given enough time. She looked out the window. But that would mean relying on him to act first. Relying on others to make their decision. And she had made hers. So why wait?

She was not sure she could wait for a miracle. She needed to confront him. She needed to ask him.

Lucy walked out the door with determination in her step, and was surprised to almost walk right into Sister Elisabeth, who was waiting outside with a knowing smile.

“Have you made your decision?” Sister Elisabeth asked, as though she already knew the answer.

“I need a coach, to go to town,” Lucy said.

Sister Elisabeth nodded understandingly. “I shall make sure that one is prepared as soon as possible. Would you like to pack anything?”

Lucy shook her head. “Depending on what happens, I might be returning to stay. I shall pack if I get the answer I want.”

“And what answer would that be?” Sister Elisabeth asked.

“I pray for a 'yes',” Lucy replied.

The coach trip was the most tension Lucy had ever felt in her life. This was not her first decision she made on her own. Nor was it her first spontaneous action. But it was the first time she felt that her own decision could truly change something in her life. The first time she was not leaving her future up to the commands, actions, or suggestions of someone else. The first time that her fate actually hung in the balance. And that was terrifying.

Lucy arrived at the inn. She knew he would be there. It was the only inn in town, and if he had expected to win her over, he might have ordered a room to stay in by night.

There was a young girl, probably no older than fourteen, sitting awkwardly at the reception guest, guarding the keys with an expression like a determined bulldog.

“Excuse me?” Lucy asked.

The girl's eyes softened at the sight of a nun's habit. “Yes, Sister?”

“Is there a man here by the name of Lord Andrew Jones?” she asked. “I have to talk to him.”

“Lord Andrew Jones gave in his keys around ten minutes ago, Sister,” the girl at the reception desk said. “But my father asked him where he was going and he said he would have lunch before ordering a coach.”

“Where would he be having lunch?” Lucy asked.

“At the front of the inn. The pub is a restaurant by day. Although if you would rather not enter it, Sister, I do understand, and I shall call

for him," the girl explained.

Lucy shook her head. "That will not be necessary. Where is the pub?"

The girl nodded towards a large oak door which connected the inn to the brewery and pub next door, apparently owned by the same family.

Lucy walked up to the door and pushed it open. She could see why a nun might not wish to be in there. Despite their best efforts to clean it up for daytime clientele, it was abundantly clear that the pub, stinking of beer and more than a little worse for wear, was the sort of establishment best viewed by night, and best smelled when inebriated. Nevertheless, there were a few men sitting at the tables, drinking coffee and talking as though they were right at home.

She looked around the room. Her eyes landed on a familiarly rugged face with skin ever so slightly more tanned than the other guests. He had not spotted her.

Slowly, she approached him, second-guessing her every step, wondering how he would react to her presence, to what she had to say... Resting a hand on his shoulder, she felt him jump as he looked at her, as though he had seen a ghost.

"Lucy?" he asked in slight disbelief.

She nodded and smiled.

"Why are you here? Have you reconsidered?" he asked, his voice beginning to take on a hopeful tone, the corners of his lips curling up, his green eyes twinkling.

"Not exactly," she replied, "I would like to speak to you about this in private."

Lord Jones paused, then nodded and smiled. He folded his newspaper and placed his half-finished coffee on top of it. Then he stood up, put on his hat, and followed Lucy out of the pub door, into the hotel, and into the empty corridor which led to the bedrooms.

Once they were alone together she took a deep breath. This was it. "Back at the convent," she began, "Sister Elisabeth said to me that in my heart of hearts I would know what was the right thing to do. And I suppose I always have known what the right thing to do was, but I've always turned to other people to give me a reason to not do what I knew to be right."

Lord Jones nodded sternly.

"And I believe you are doing the same thing. Seeking any excuse to

avoid doing the right thing, to stick to your convictions even when they have been proven wrong," Lucy continued.

"Where are you going with this?" Lord Jones asked, looking a little perplexed. "Do you not want to be at the convent? Would you... would you like to come home with me? Or... run away with me?"

Lucy shook her head. "All my life I have been indecisive. I have waited for others to decide for me, to give me a suggestion or a command I could follow. But I should have been making my own decisions. And I am ready to make a decision right now. And that decision has nothing to do with what you want from me, or what my parents want. It is not what has been suggested to me, or commanded of me by society at large. It is what I know to be good, and godly, and the right choice for me." She could feel her hands sweating and shaking.

"You need to say what it is if you want me to know," Lord Jones said, clearly as eager to hear it as she was to say it.

"Seeing as you will never ask me to marry you," Lucy drew a deep breath, "Lord Andrew Jones, would you be my husband?"

"I... I cannot, Lucy," Lord Jones replied, stammering a little. "I am not ready to marry, I doubt I ever shall be."

"But it is the right thing to do," Lucy replied. "You desire me, and I desire you. God made man and woman to be one flesh. And for that we must marry. Why deny ourselves and the world the goodness which would come from our union? We are not martyrs. We do not need to be. We could be lovers. We could be examples."

Lord Jones shook his head slowly. But he did not go anywhere. He was awkward, shy, vulnerable... His loving core was exposed to her yet again. And she loved it. It was raw perfection. Everything she wanted in a man she found in him: he was strong, yet loving, resilient yet vulnerable, cynical yet tender. He was the perfect balance of everything she needed.

"You were afraid of marriage because, like me, you did not feel you could trust women, or marriage. But I am not asking you to trust women or marriage. I am asking you to trust me. Do you trust me?" Lucy asked, clasping his hand tightly.

"I do. I do trust you," he replied, his face flushing bright red. "And I shall marry you. You insane woman."

Lucy felt her heart beat speed up even more, so fast she was not sure if

she was dying, or living for the first time in years. She looked into his eyes and felt an appreciative tear trickle out of the corner of hers and glide down her face.

He grinned, his free hand rising to stroke her cheek so gently, so tenderly... She sighed. When he needed her to be strong, she was there for him to lean on. And when she was weak, he was there for her to lean on. It was a match made in heaven. And now it could be made real. Now she could be his forever.

His lips locked with hers and she briefly wondered what anyone would think if they walked in. What would they would make of a well-dressed unmarried gentleman, standing in a hotel hallway, kissing a young woman in a nun's habit?

A half second later she did not care. It was not about what others might think or judge. Not about what they think she ought to do, or what they would do in her situation. It was about her, and him, and what was right. This was the right thing to do.

Chapter 32

Epilogue

Leaving the convent was done with a heavy heart, but a huge weight lifted off her mind. Lucy loved and appreciated Sister Elisabeth for all the wisdom she had given. But Lucy also knew that she did not belong there. She had thanked the Sisters from the bottom of her heart for their support and love, but declared that she needed to take her leave, and marry Lord Jones. A few Sisters had cast cold glances her way, but Lucy remembered Sister Elisabeth's words and thought nothing of them. Everyone would have their own perspective, but she was following her own path.

Back at home, the rage had not even started regarding her alleged affair with Lord Jones. Clara had been found down a hallway with a married gentleman and her reputation was quite in tatters. The last anyone had heard from her was that Edmund had ended the engagement as soon as he found out and that Clara had returned home to her parents in London. Lucy felt a little sorry for Clara, but also a deep sense of relief that the girl had received a taste of her own medicine.

Lord and Lady Fitzgerald breathed the world's heaviest sigh of relief when they saw their daughter come home with an eligible young man who was asking for her hand in marriage. Lady Fitzgerald confessed that she had never liked the idea of Lucy becoming a nun, and Lord Fitzgerald agreed that the life of a good wife to a Baron would suit her far better. Even Antoinette and Mary seemed fairly unsurprised by her decision. After all, it was true that they had guessed it from the beginning.

Across the village the news spread like wildfire. Rumours of Lucy and Lord Jones's indecency transformed into rumours of their true tale of star-crossed love, and Clara's wicked attempts to drive them apart. They were becoming their very own fairytale in the eyes of the public.

Ordinarily Lucy would have rejected all of this just to spite society, to prove she was not what they expected of her. She would have turned against them, denied everything they said, and fought their urge to turn everything into an idealized, unreasonably perfect romance. But

defying society was no better than adhering strictly to its norms. Far better to just do whatever suited her best, and move on from there. She was simply pleased to know that the man she had grown to love so dearly would finally be all hers.

And if people wished to turn her love into a fairy tale? That was fine as well. People needed hopes and dreams to cling onto. People needed to be inspired to do better, to follow the path set out for them, to believe in one another. And if a fairy tale was what it took to make them do so, then she would happily become a fairy tale.

More aware of the actual challenges she had overcome, and the ones which inevitably lay ahead, Lucy knew that her life was going to change. But there was a comforting sensation that for once it would all change for the better. It could not go wrong with Lord Jones by her side.



Despite being a cold Spring morning, the sun rose on her wedding day so bright that it hurt her eyes as the curtains were flung open and the maids began to rush around her, ensuring she was awake and properly groomed in time. She blinked and rolled over in bed, grumbling about all the noise, before remembering what day it was and sitting bolt upright.

“I'm getting married,” she said, feeling stunned and excited.

Lucy rushed to her mirror where she began gently combing her hair and the maids crowded around her, preparing to assist her with her makeup.

She had kept her hair cut short, much to her mother's despair and Lord Jones's delight, and it was teased into slight waves and to be adorned with a crown of snowdrops for the big event. Her lips were stained pink and shone beautifully with a slight dab of honey balm, and her cheeks were brushed with a gentle flush of rose. She looked like a little pixie princess, and she had never felt more magical, nor more beautiful.

“You look so sweet,” a maid sighed, “if only you had not cut your hair.”

Lucy laughed. “I look wonderful with and without my hair,” she replied with a confidence which came from her heart, not just her head. She believed her words wholeheartedly.

Being laced into her stunning white dress, decorated with pearls, made her feel like a real Lady, a true member of high society... which she would be, of course, once she was a married woman. It was odd to think how her class would not change at all, but the entire world would change for her. She would have much more freedom to do as she pleased. And she did not fear it. She relished the idea. Slipping on her dainty white slippers, she felt her transformation complete. She was the very picture of bridal beauty.

Walking outside she saw her coach and almost fainted from how resplendent it was. It was white, decorated with accents in gold and black, and laden with every sort of Winter flower, berry, and green that existed, from pinches of Holly to diminutive nodding daffodils.

“What do you think?” Lady Fitzgerald asked, grabbing her daughter's hand and squeezing it in excitement.

“It is perfect,” Lucy replied breathlessly.

It amazed her that her mother had managed to remember every minute detail she had requested for her fairytale wedding as a little girl. The ornate coach and the white horses, the delicate flowers built on top of one another into overwhelming displays of natural beauty... But there had been no roses.

The flowers which had been chosen were the ones only available in Winter and Spring. Lucy had had the option of choosing fake flowers, or of waiting until summer to marry, but it did not feel right to her.

She wanted to marry soon, and if she had a Winter wedding, she wished to be surrounded by the sort of flowers which bloomed in the icy adversity of the season. Like her, they defied the odds and rose triumphant above the ice. They were no worse for wear, they did not need to wait for the cold to dissipate. They simply pushed through and coexisted with the harshness of Winter.

Despite the extravagance of the ceremony, there would be no after party, and no lunch. The wedding would take place in the early hours of the morning, and be a fairly simple affair, followed by breakfast. However much she wanted an elaborate fairytail wedding fit for a princess, Lucy was also sensitive to her parents' financial needs and her guests' time pressures. She simply wished for a small gathering to witness her union with Lord Jones. That would do.

Her parents were there, as were Antoinette and Duke Perry, Mary and Duke Haskett, and Thomas and Julia. She had extended an invitation to Sister Elisabeth, though she could only hope that her dear friend would arrive. The Prince and Princess had politely declined their

invitation as they were leaving for the Winter, but asked her to visit as and when she pleased once they were back. Overall, Lucy was content that those she loved would be able to be there, even if the ceremony was not an overblown regal affair with a hundred attendants.

The great stone church was decorated with sleek white ribbons and the same bright Winter blooms outside, and walking up the steps she felt a genuine sense of awe. She could hear the music as she walked in. Standing just behind the second pair of doors, she wanted to peer out down the aisle, but held back. She wanted to really savour the sights and sounds for the first time, to take it all in at once. She walked around the corner, where her father and her sweet little bridesmaids, Mary and Antoinette's daughters, waited for her.

The little girls let out gasps of admiration. Lilly, now aged three, muttered “you are so pretty Miss Fitzgerald”, and Bea, although she was not yet speaking, babbled in the same happy, conspiratorial tone, and stuck her hand in the basket of flowers.

“I'll help her walk,” Lilly said with a reassuring nod to Lucy, nodding and taking Bea's hand firmly.

“Thank you,” Lucy replied with a smile. “I am sure you shall both do an admirable job as flower girls.”

The two girls beamed and peeked out at the aisle, as though awaiting their cue.

Her father held out his arm for her. She could tell from the hints of redness in his eyes that he had cried, but she knew that he would manage to avoid crying anymore until he was home and in private again. She slipped her fingers into the crook of his elbow and patted his arm comfortingly. “Thank you, father, for everything,” she said with a smile.

He nodded, clearly holding back some tears. “I knew life would turn out in your favour, Lucy, but I am so proud of you,” he replied.

The music abruptly changed tone, and Lucy ushered the two girls out to the bottom of the aisle, where they began reaching their little fists carefully into the basket, seizing flowers and lifting them up high.

As Lucy stepped out, the flower girls cast early tiny daffodils and snowdrops in front of her, creating a luscious carpet of late Winter flowers that felt as light and airy as clouds beneath her feet. Although the church was far from crowded, Lucy's heart lifted as she saw that nearly everyone they had invited was in attendance. Save the Prince and Princess, all their closest friends and relatives were there,

watching her walk down the aisle.

She could see that her mother was weeping and yet almost laughing at the same time, she was so happy. Antoinette smiled with an expression of deep satisfaction. Duke Perry and Sister Elisabeth looked on with the same warm affection as Lucy's father had directed towards her earlier. Mary and Duke Haskett looked at peace and proud of her.

And Lord Jones, standing at the top of the aisle, looked more than a little nervous, even though he tried to hide it. He was smarter than she had ever seen him before, his suit almost as gleaming as her dress, his cravat a stunning shade of emerald green which brought out the brightness of his eyes, and only somewhat concealed his blushing cheeks and slightly nervous smile.

Nevertheless, with each step she took closer to him she could see the love and raw desire in his eyes. And she knew that she was looking at him with that same combination of awe, affection, and raw, primal need.

Lucy felt her heartthrob for this perfect man. This man who understood her, and loved her, and allowed her to love him in her own way. This man she found to be unbelievably handsome, and who found her to be stunningly beautiful, no matter what she wore or did to her hair. She wanted nothing more than to spend every single day by his side.

As she joined him, he took her hands and gazed deeply into her eyes, his green ones warm with love and passion, her face reflected in his pupils.

“You are breathtakingly beautiful,” he whispered to her as they came face to face for the first time in almost a week. “And in a matter of minutes, you shall be all mine.”

Lucy sighed and gripped his hands firmly. “And you shall be mine. Forever and ever.”

“Dearly beloved,” the priest began, “we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocence, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought, in Cana of Galilee; and is commended of Saint Paul to be honourable among all men.

“It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in

the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.

“It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore if any man can show any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace.”

And just like that, it was nearly done...

It was a little bit scary to know they were embarking on this journey wholly unprepared. But Lucy knew that whatever happened, they would make it work. That was what they did. They stared reality square in the face and made it work in their favour. And they would continue to do so, now as one, rather than as two.

Lord Jones picked up the ring, gazing into her eyes. She once again felt as though he held her heart in his hands, or had transplanted it into his own chest, where it would beat forever beside his own.

She watched every movement of his lips keenly, as he recited his lines. “With this Ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

As Andrew slipped the ring onto her finger and they were proclaimed Lord and Lady, she stepped closer to him, perhaps less daintily than she should have, and gazed into his eyes. He bowed down and pressed his lips softly against hers.

Of course she still did not believe in fairy tales. They were ridiculous fantasies told to children. But that didn't mean she should not try her best to live her own one, did it?

The End?
(Turn the page)

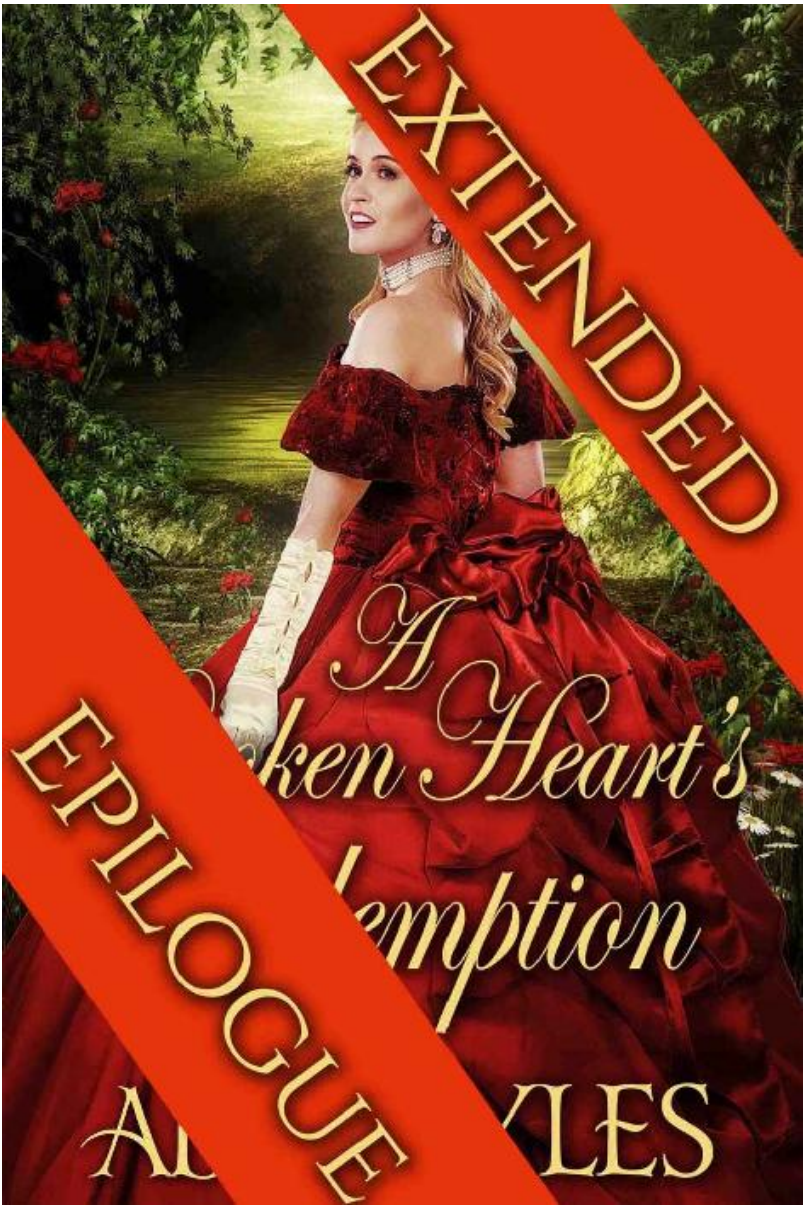
The Extended Epilogue

The Lady The Duke and The Gentleman

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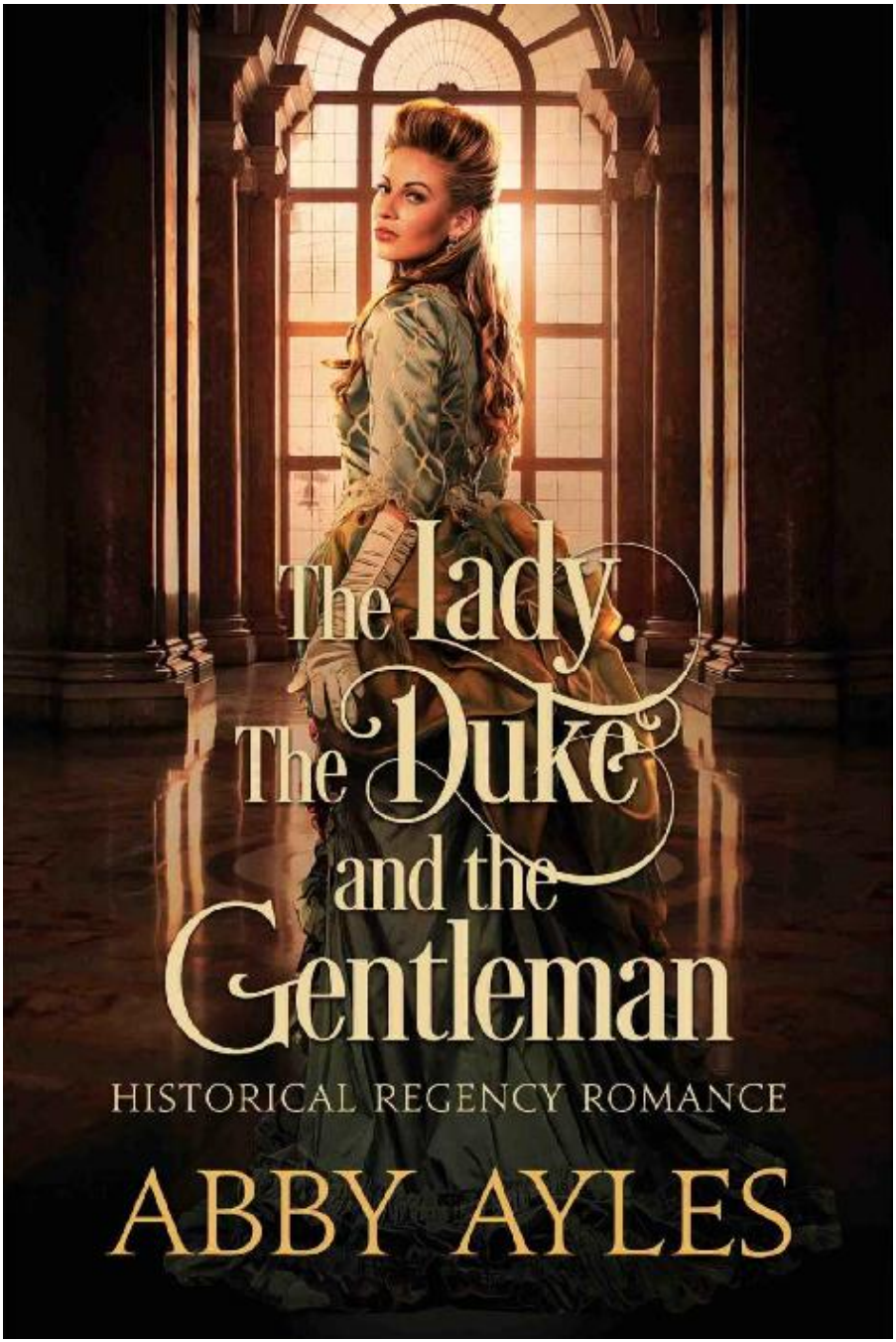
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The Lady, The Duke and the Gentleman
HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE
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The Lady The Duke and The Gentleman

Chapter 1

Mary and Duke Haskett's wedding was a sight to behold. The rich scent of early autumn roses, the joyful bridesmaids' dresses, the delectable food, the fine music, and, of course, the handsome groom and the beautiful bride and they embarked on a journey of self-discovery and family together. It was enough to make Antoinette's heart flutter.

She was proud she had helped her cousin win over a perfect suitor and find joy in marriage. Now, if only she could do the same...

As she danced with yet another very interested young man, she glanced over at her parents who were, as always, paying her no attention whatsoever. How was she supposed to find a husband when her parents would not even narrow down her list of suitors, let alone pick one or two for her to consider? Having an older sister and an older brother, she had known she would probably marry later than others her same age. Her sister was married, her brother was betrothed and away in India on a pilgrimage, and still, the months went by and Antoinette twiddled her thumbs in anticipation. She was beginning to feel a little like a beef joint which had been left over from the night before, sliced and just carelessly left on the table alongside breakfast. When were her parents going to show some real interest in her marriage?

The man in front of her must have been speaking. His lips were moving. She could barely hear what the young man was saying over the noise of her own thoughts. This would not do.

As the pace of the dance changed, and the eligible young men and women traded partners, Antoinette slipped away to where her parents were having an animated discussion with Baron and Baroness Fitzroy —the parents of her childhood friend and current pen-mate Lucy.

Antoinette curtsied. “Good afternoon, Baron Fitzroy, Baroness Fitzroy.” They nodded and greeted her back. “Well, mother, what did you think of him?” she asked.

Her mother shook her head a little. “I'm terribly sorry, dear. I have no idea whom you are referring to.”

“The young man I was dancing with, a young Master Garvey,” she elaborated.

“Oh, of the Suffolk Garveys? How was he? Was he nice?” her mother continued in a friendly tone of voice.

Antoinette felt herself internally scream, but pressed her lips together and smiled politely to not offend the company. “I am not sure. I would very much like your guidance, perhaps your opinion.”

“You just dance away, my dear, you are still young. If any young man takes your fancy we can meet his parents later,” her father added in a tone of voice which suggested he thought he was being helpful. He wasn’t.

Antoinette nodded. “Of course, father.” She curtsied again and walked up to where the couples were dancing, quietly waiting on the sidelines for an eligible man to ask her to dance with him.

This was ridiculous. There had to be thirty, maybe even forty, single young men dancing. Not to mention the few dozen standing and observing. Considering many were friends of Duke Haskett's, there was a rich selection of handsome, wealthy, high-status men, all of whom would make excellent husbands to someone. So how would she know who would make the most excellent husband for *her*?

She sighed and looked at the standing crowd, neck craned up, smiling faintly as she attempted to make eye contact with someone, anyone, who wished to dance. She did not know the faintest thing about marriage, or how one went about pairing a couple. And yet her parents seemed to be casting her out to find her own husband, not taking much interest in the whole affair. She wished they would just pick a man who would fit her well, allow them to court, and then—should all go to plan—she could be married in a few months as Mary was.

Mary, the great sceptic who had been scared her chosen suitor would not be appropriate for her or meet her needs. Mary, the just-married bride, dancing with said suitor right now. If even someone who had been as nervous as her cousin could happily marry this way, Antoinette felt she would enjoy fantastic success.

Finally, her eyes locked with those of a tall man with chocolate brown hair and shining, sky-blue eyes. He smiled a knowing smile and weaved his way through the crowd to where she was. Antoinette felt a

sense of relief, and slight excitement, as the dance ended and he extended his hand to her.

“May I have this dance?” he asked, bowing slightly.

“You may,” she replied, placing her hand in his and half-curtsying.

As they walked out to the sound of the next dance beginning, Antoinette resolved to make the most of her situation. If her parents truly weren't going to show any initiative, then it was up to her to learn some names and vet the candidates. Hopefully if she could talk to her parents tomorrow with a few specific men in mind, the whole process could begin.

“I am Antoinette Byrd, daughter of Baron and Baroness Byrd,” she said, smiling. “How do you do, strange man?”

He let out a surprised laugh. “My, you are a bold one. And a funny one. I am Alexander Godwin,” he replied.

Antoinette paused briefly. She knew that name from somewhere. “The Duke?” she asked with a slight gasp. “Alexander Godwin, Duke of Hamilton?” she asked again.

“The one. Why do you look so surprised?” His smile showed that he was slightly amused. “It's perfectly natural for one Duke to know another, is it not?”

“I have heard little of you, Your Grace, but I expected you to be older,” she replied without thinking. The heat rose to her face. “I do apologize, I spoke without thinking,” she added hastily.

“Indeed. An awful trait in a woman, don't you think?” he asked.

“An awful trait in any person, Your Grace.” Antoinette tried to sound as polite as possible. She never did like the men who spoke in a way that suggested that impoliteness or rashness is forgivable in men. Having been raised alongside both a brother and a sister, she was of the firm belief that although men and women played different parts in society, neither should be rude if they could possibly avoid it.

“Indeed,” the Duke replied. From his expression, she could see he could not think of what to say next.

“I am assuming from Your Grace's invitation to dance that Your Grace is still single?” Antoinette said, in an effort to revive the conversation.

“Oh yes, Miss Byrd, for now,” he said with a soft smile. She was beginning to see that he was not quite as bold as she had initially assumed. And yet, his slight sheepishness was not entirely off-putting.

“And why would a man of Your Grace's status be struggling to find a wife?” she continued.

Antoinette cringed at her words.

“Quite the forward one, aren't we?” he replied with a slight laugh. “I suppose I am not a Duke of enough status, or social presence, to attract many proposals. And yet my standards are too high to have been met thus far,”

“Quite the conundrum,” Antoinette replied with a sharp smile. “If one does not meet many people and does not find someone worth marrying among those one does meet, then one may stand to remain unwed one's entire life...”

“A much less terrifying prospect for a man of wealth and status than for a young woman, I assure you.”

“And yet Your Grace is still here, dancing with an unattached young woman.” Antoinette's eyes locked with Duke Godwin's. She knew she was giving him a flirty look, or at least that’s what she hoped she was giving him through her flushed face…she was prepared to take her chances. She could always feign ignorance if he accused her of being too forward. Life was always given to those who took chances.

She spotted a slight flush of red on his cheeks and broke eye contact swiftly. *Look too little and you are cold. Look too long and you are unladylike.* In the middle was the scale of what was appropriate, and Antoinette always felt that gazing as long as was possibly appropriate would be the best way to capture a man's interest.

Duke Godwin cleared his throat. “I am dancing with young women I like,” he explained. “Just because I can remain unwed does not mean I am committed to the idea.”

As the dance ended, Antoinette wanted to set the next part of her plan in motion. She was not particularly enjoying being the one managing the technical and logical aspects... but if her parents weren't going to, then it would be up to her, wouldn't it? She curtsied and smiled at Duke Godwin.

“If Your Grace truly does like a simple young woman such as myself, perhaps he would wish to meet Baron and Baroness Byrd?” she suggested.

Duke Godwin looked a little surprised, but also pleased. It seemed as though Antoinette's forwardness was feeding his ego. She wasn't sure if she liked—or disliked—this yet.

“Very well, I shall meet the parents of the simple young woman,” he replied with a laugh, following her closely as she made her way to where her parents were still talking to the Fitzroys.

She curtsied again. “I would like to introduce everyone to His Grace Alexander Godwin, Duke of Hamilton.”

Antoinette looked on eagerly as her parents finally engaged, greeted him, asked him a few questions about himself and finally incorporated him into their animated conversation with the Fitzroys—which apparently was about the true purpose of Christian Mission. She felt relieved and wondered whether she should attempt to weigh in on the matter and impress Duke Godwin.

But she did not know enough about Duke Godwin to even begin to impress him. If he knew much less than her about the subject he would be insulted. Should he know much more than her, he would not be impressed. It was too difficult. She would have to rely on her parents to win him over and persuade him that she would make a wonderful wife.

However, as the minutes flew by and another dance ended, the conversation continued to be about Christian Mission. Antoinette felt that they were treating Duke Godwin's presence as a mere attempt at mingling with some higher class people, rather than vetting a potential suitor. She felt the frustration rise. Should she ask him back to the dance? No, that would look frivolous. She knew she needed to join in, and she listened carefully for a point where she could.

“I simply cannot see how any amount of peaching could possibly begin to address the lack of faith and natural Godliness in these people,” Baron Fitzroy finally interjected, shaking his head. It was just the break in the conversation Antoinette needed.

“I do not believe there is any such thing as a person who lacks faith and Godliness,” Antoinette replied.

Duke Godwin glanced her way and smiled lightly again, as though welcoming her back to the conversation. “How so?” he asked.

“We are all made in God's image, are we not? We are all people, are we not? If we did not believe these people were capable of Godliness, then we would not be making an effort to convert them,” she explained. “One cannot make gold out of stone, or a Christian out of a dog.”

“But who is to say that they are Godly?” Baron Fitzroy contested. “Being a person and being Godly are two different things, surely.”

“They are made in God's image, as are we. Just because they have not accepted our Lord as their saviour does not mean they have no Godliness, simply that they are out of touch,” she explained.

“So you are saying they are not ungodly, but that their Godliness is simply an untapped potential?” Duke Godwin asked with a slight spark in his eye. “An interesting idea from a young woman.”

“My brother is in India, spreading the Good Word,” she replied. “I learned much from him as a girl.”

Duke Godwin nodded. “Indeed you have. At any rate, it has been my pleasure to make your acquaintances, but I must see my friend Duke Haskett before I depart.” He bowed slightly and everyone bowed and curtsied deeper in respect.

“The pleasure was all ours,” Baron Byrd replied, shaking Duke Godwin's hand before the man, nodding and smiling politely, vanished into the crowd.

Noticing the success of her approach so far emboldened Antoinette. She danced with several more single men that night, bringing each in turn to meet her parents. And yet none seemed to leave the same impression on her and her parents as Duke Godwin had. Perhaps it was merely his status and his education, but the way he spoke and the way he carried himself made him so much more desirable than any of the other men she saw that night.

And yet Antoinette had a nagging feeling that all her efforts would come to nothing at all. That her parents would simply pass up her opportunity with Duke Godwin and she would be exactly where she had started that evening.

As Antoinette congratulated her cousin for what felt like the hundredth time, Mary took her hand. “What is the matter?” she asked softly.

“Nothing at all, I am simply tired.” Antoinette tried to excuse herself.

“You seemed so jovial earlier,” Mary pressed.

Antoinette shook her head. “It would be unfair to burden you with my silly concerns on your wedding day.”

“No, you have helped me so much, pray tell,” Mary insisted again.

Antoinette drew a deep breath and sighed. “I am worried about my own marriage prospects. Namely, that as of yet I have none.”

Mary nodded. Antoinette's parents' lack of interest in finding her a

suitor had been a conversation topic amongst them before.

“I know that they must eventually decide to move me towards marriage, but I feel they are passing up too many good opportunities,” Antoinette continued.

“What would you normally do?” Mary asked.

Antoinette shook her head. “There is no 'normally,’ I have no idea right now.”

“If this were my problem, you would tell me, 'Mary, talk to your parents, tell them what you think, if you don't act then you will never get what you wish for,’” Mary elaborated, mimicking her cousin's voice.

Antoinette laughed. “I sound nothing like that! But yes, I suppose I would.” She sighed. “It's so much more difficult when it's your own parents, though.”

Mary nodded. “Believe me, I understand. But if you truly, from the bottom of your heart, believe you could miss an opportunity of a lifetime, then you need to tell them so.”

Antoinette nodded back. “I really ought to take my own advice more often.”

Mary laughed. “You really should.”

Antoinette looked over to where her parents were. Mary was right. She needed to confront them about Duke Godwin and let them know she was interested in him. It was better to be a rude daughter than spend the rest of her life knowing she did not speak up at the right time…or at all.

Chapter 2

The next morning, Antoinette felt nervous but excited. Mary was right, after all. Antoinette spent so much time advising others to take action, she would be an absolute hypocrite if she did not take her own advice. And although up until this point none of her suitors had mainly caught her eye, Duke Godwin had definitely been an exception the night before.

Sure, he had been a little condescending at times, but she understood it. She was a younger woman a whole class beneath him. It was natural he may know more than her, or have stronger opinions than her. For a man in his position, he was actually rather forgiving.

And in every other aspect, he seemed desirable. He was a Duke, with great wealth behind him. He was educated and well-spoken. Her parents seemed impressed by him and eager to talk with him. Not to mention, he was handsome. She could easily envisage herself spending a lifetime with this man. And, what is more, she felt her parents would be pleased with this decision.

Heading downstairs for breakfast, she felt a little giddy. This was just like in her romance novels, where the heroine meets her one true love, and then their courtship begins. Of course in Antoinette's case, she expected they not need overcome the sheer number of trials the heroines in her books face. After all, adventurous though she may be, she felt that continually facing social and moral dilemmas would be less of an adventure and a more of constant stress. But nevertheless, she knew that this would be the start of her romance.

“You look most jovial this morning,” Lady Byrd said, seeing her daughter stride into the room with a bounce in her step. “Good news?”

“In a way,” Antoinette said. “I have an announcement.”

“Well, so do we,” replied her father. “Age comes before beauty after all.”

Antoinette felt her excitement double at the prospect of both

delivering and receiving an announcement. She sat down at the table, feeling her foot tap lightly against the carpet as she waited for her father to speak.

“Having seen how you conducted yourself last night, your mother and I have reached a conclusion about your marriage prospects,” her father began, glancing at her mother.

“You were polite, graceful, demure, and yet not too silent, nor too passive,” her mother said, nodding. “You were in every way a lady.”

“We had originally had our reservations about allowing you to see your suitors seriously. You have always been a bit too bold, a bit too... unladylike. We were concerned that you would not attract the right sort of a man. But last night you showed us that you are determined to be wed and willing to behave yourself like the young lady you are. You have inspired great confidence in us,” Lord Byrd said. “Would you like to begin vetting your prospects in earnest?”

“Oh yes!” Antoinette said, suddenly checking herself and taking a deep breath. “That would be most wonderful.”

Her mother laughed a little. “Very well, what was your announcement?”

“It was of a similar nature,” Antoinette replied. “I had not been too eager regarding any of my suitors until now, but... last night I met a man who I believe may make a most excellent suitor. Duke Alexander Godwin.”

Her mother smiled. “That is fantastic news,” she said. “Duke Godwin would make a fine suitor indeed, and he seemed to be interested in you.”

Her father nodded his head with the faintest trace of a smile emerging on his lips also. “Yes, Duke Godwin is an excellent option. I shall write to him immediately to ensure that he is aware of our interest.”

“Who else would you like to consider?” Lady Byrd asked.

Antoinette felt slightly disappointed. *Not this again.* She knew of countless eligible young men, and other than Duke Godwin, none stood out from the rest whatsoever. How could she select a few from that vast group? She shook her head. “Whoever you believe is a good prospect,” she replied. “I trust you, as my parents, to know what is best for me.”

Lady Byrd nodded. “We shall make a selection, to ensure that you are not too restricted in your choices. But if you wish, we can focus our

attention largely on Duke Godwin."

Antoinette nodded back eagerly. "Nothing would make me happier."

"Then it is decided," Lord Byrd said, "I shall write to Duke Godwin immediately to inform him of our interest."

Antoinette felt her heart soar. This was precisely what she had wanted for the past couple of years. For her parents to take her interest in marriage more seriously, for them to provide the support and assistance she so desperately needed to make the right decision when it came to finding a husband.

After breakfast, Lord Byrd retired to his study to compose the letter, and Antoinette requested leave from Lady Byrd to go and tell her cousin, Mary, the good news.

"Antoinette, I believe you are forgetting something," Lady Byrd replied as she sorted some cut flowers, ready to spend the afternoon building an artistic arrangement.

"Ah, yes..." Antoinette suddenly realized. Mary had only married the day before. Not only would she not be home with her parents, but she would probably not be at Duke Haskett's local manor either. She sat down heavily in a chair and sighed dejectedly. "But I wish to speak with someone of the good news."

"Father Howe, perhaps?" Lady Byrd suggested, raising an eyebrow at her daughter's dramatics.

"The vicar?" Antoinette cringed slightly.

"Do not speak of him in that tone. He is a good man and a vital part of our community," Lady Byrd replied sternly.

Antoinette shook her head. "It is not that... I simply do not believe it is a conversation men could understand."

Lady Byrd hesitated. "Perhaps not. You could go to see Eleanor."

Antoinette shook her head again. "Eleanor and all her sisters are away with their parents, attending some charity events to raise money for London hospitals and poorhouses this Christmas. I would not even know where to write them right now."

"Perhaps you should write a letter to Lucy, then, it has been some time since you had correspondence with her," Lady Byrd replied. "She is still at boarding school?"

Antoinette stared at her feet. "You are right, I have not spoken to her

for a month or more. I hope that she is doing well. Last I heard, she said her stay in boarding school would be coming to a close next year, and she was coming home. Yes, I shall write her a letter."

As Antoinette stood up, she noticed her mother shake her head with a slight smile before beginning her arrangement.

Antoinette did not wholly understand her parents' aversion to her nature. Sure, she was a little excitable, and perhaps a bit loud and forward. But it was nothing that would interfere with her ability to be a good lady, wife, and mother. If anything, from her experience volunteering at Sunday school and local orphanages, she found that her slightly less stern demeanour made her more endearing to children than some of the less excitable women were. And that closeness with children was something she treasured. She had a natural affinity for them and did not understand how some governesses and teachers would be so strict with the poor little things. She felt confident that she would make an excellent mother someday, not despite her slightly boisterous and rebellious nature, but because of it.

But she was also coming to see that, even though she did not entirely understand the rigid social expectations which surrounded her, she had to conform to them. If she wanted to marry and marry well, it was necessary to act more like a Lady, to be more controlled, demure, and conforming. Once she wed, she would be in a better position to relax and be her true self. But until then, she significantly improved her prospects by hiding some parts of her personality.

Sitting at her dresser, she nudged her toiletries to one side with her arm before setting up a writing pad, some paper, and a quill.

"Dearest Lucy,

I am terribly sorry that I have not written sooner. There is no excuse for my silence. However, if it is of any reassurance, I have been incredibly busy, and there is much to tell you.

My brother, as you know, has departed on yet another Mission to India. It is hard work for him, but in his last letter he intimated that he is genuinely satisfied with the good being done, and suggested he may be away some time.

You may recall that my cousin, Mary Elridge, was available for marriage and seeing some very eligible suitors. Yesterday she was finally wed to Duke Haskett, Duke of York. Despite the trials which fate cast in their way, they have seen the value in one another, and are now united in Holy Matrimony, and very much in love.

Which leads to my present circumstances. My parents have, after much deliberation, decided it is time for me to consider marriage in earnest. And not a moment too soon! Yesterday afternoon, at Mary's wedding breakfast, I met the man who is sure to become my husband. I will not reveal too much as of yet, for fear that I am wrong. But I shall hopefully see him soon, and I eagerly anticipate that day.

I hope that you are well, and would love for you to be home for Christmas.

Yours dearly,

Antoinette"

Sealing the envelope, Antoinette decided she would post it by hand. That way at least she would get some fresh air. She desperately needed to cool off, as all the thrills of the morning had made her blood run hot, and her dress itched uncomfortably. Yet another thing she could not comprehend about the rules society imposed on her. She knew she needed to dress modestly, but many city girls whom she knew dressed much more lightly, almost in the fashion of Ancient Greek statues, with one or two flowing layers. Meanwhile, in the villages the fashion was moving, but still leaned towards bigger and heavier.

Her own parents were a bit lenient about conformity in this respect. Antoinette wore dresses which were much lighter and sleeker than most of the girls in the village. But they were still heavy and uncomfortable in comparison to the latest city fashions. She simply could not fathom why clothing which was modest enough for the city was not modest enough for the country. Especially when the city clothes were so much more comfortable.

"I wish to post my letter to Lucy," Antoinette said, peering into the front room, where her mother was still working on her flower arrangement.

"Could you not send it with a messenger? Or perhaps wait for the postman so that someone can hand it over?" her mother asked.

"I would like to walk a little, the exercise will do me good," Antoinette replied.

"Very well," Lady Byrd said. "But make sure to ask a maid to escort you."

"Of course, mother," she answered.

Her parents were so peculiar with what social norms they adhered to and which they did not. They were not happy with her adopting city

fashions, or walking down the road unescorted to post a letter. Yet they were perfectly happy for her to make major decisions about her suitors. But then, they did not believe she was mature enough to marry until recently, despite giving her so much freedom. It made no sense to her.

She was sure, the more she thought about it, that her parents were simply going along with whatever fads and trends their friends were following. They had no consistency, no pattern to their behaviour. It was simply as close to average as they could get. Antoinette could be more fashionable than the other young women in the village, but she had to be more conventional than city girls. She was expected not only to observe potential suitors and create a list of those she deemed reasonable but also to behave like a traditional lady in every other aspect. She had to go out and lead an active life, but always with someone at her side. Their insistence on staying in the grey area was confusing and frustrating to her.

As she walked down the lane and entered the village, she was so caught up in her own thoughts she almost missed the two figures standing down another lane, talking in front of a pie shop. But a second glance revealed that it was, in fact, her father and another man, talking.

She paused briefly and watched them for a second.

“Is anything the matter, mistress?” the maid asked.

Antoinette shook her head a little. “Who is that speaking to father?” she replied.

“I do not know, mistress. His face seems familiar, but I know not from where.”

Antoinette pondered waving and shouting, then realized it would be too unladylike. She also considered going over to see them, but perhaps that would be rude? She sighed. Why did this all have to be so complicated? Was she really hurting anyone when she was forward and loud? It seemed more designed to inconvenience her than anything else.

As she wondered what to do, her father and the man shook hands and parted ways. The man began walking towards the road, whereas her father walked in the opposite direction and disappeared around a corner. With no opportunity of finding out who this man was, all Antoinette could do was scrutinize him. He was reasonably tall, and only a few years older than her. His tidy blonde hair was well-kept, but his clothes suggested he was a little less wealthy than the people

her father usually associated with. Still, he carried himself with the dignity and confidence of a man who could not possibly be of weak character or morals. He seemed quite the enigma.

He glanced over at her, doubtlessly sensing her eyes upon him, and she looked at her letter instead, as though making sure the address was spelled correctly. Glancing back up, she saw he had continued down the road. Who was he? Why was her father speaking to him? And, most of all, why could she not get this perfect stranger off her mind all of a sudden? She would have to ask her father about this strange man later. Something about him was…peculiar.

Chapter 3

When Antoinette got home, her father was not yet back from his errands. She knew that when he was about town, he could be gone for hours, possibly until the evening. But still, she felt her curiosity mounting. It was just too much to bear.

Catching herself thinking about her father and the strange man yet again as she read a book, she wondered why she could not get this subject off her mind. She had always been nosey, but this was far too much. She closed her book, unable to focus, and looked out the window. She knew that a lady ought not gossip or get excited about secrets and other people's lives. She also knew full well that most ladies *did*. Why should she correct herself and fight her own thoughts when nobody else would, or even could? No, she was sure that curiosity was natural and healthy. Though, of course, she could never say so in polite company.

The sun was already setting and she knew he had to be home soon. He never stayed away the night. Still, despite knowing it was coming, hearing the door downstairs close brought on a surge of excitement. She took a deep breath. She ought not look too energetic or curious in front of her parents, or they would decide she was being childish and possibly stop taking her suitors seriously until she behaved herself again.

Making sure she looked neat and tidy, she headed downstairs to where her parents were talking in the front room. She could smell that dinner was being served in the dining room, and she knew that it would be best to ask her father before or after he ate, not over a meal.

She waited patiently in the doorway as her parents talked. They truly were her role models. A loving, trusting couple in a good, Christian marriage, who still showed each other respect and affection after two and a half decades of marriage and three children. She sighed.

“Antoinette, I did not see you there, come on in, honey,” her mother called.

She nodded and walked into the room. She made eye contact with her father and wondered how to introduce and phrase the question.

“Well, what is it?” her father asked, an eyebrow rose in suspicion.

“Father, I wanted to ask...” she began. She paused, unsure how to continue. “Well, the matter is... I saw you were talking to a man in town earlier and...” A wave of inspiration hit her. “You see, the maid who was with me said she knew him from somewhere and I was wondering who it was, is all.”

Her father shook his head. “Perhaps she knows him from somewhere else. He has not been here before.”

“Oh... Who is he?” Antoinette pressed.

“Nobody of much importance,” her father replied. “Stop being so nosey, you will know what you need to know, when you need to know it.”

Antoinette was highly suspicious. But what could she say? Her father was right, after all. She was trying to find out about something which she had no part in. But she couldn't see what was so wrong about asking him the question.

That night she could not rest. It was so frustrating, not to be able to say what she thought or talk about whatever she wished to. It was just as frustrating knowing that Duke Godwin would be responding, possibly as soon as tomorrow, and she would have to wait. Everything seemed to revolve around waiting for the right time, the right place, and the right person.

But she did not want to wait. She ached to actually do something.



Two days later, Antoinette was anxious about the lack of a reply from Duke Godwin. He was not so far away that she could expect the post to take so long. Of course, he would probably be very busy with important affairs related to his Duchy. She could not begin to imagine how busy a Duke's schedule must be. And yet... if in two days he had not composed a reply, how important could *she* be to him?

One would expect, at the very least, that if he were to find himself too busy to consider her parents' proposition, he would have had the decency to send a letter explaining the delay. But nothing was happening, and Antoinette was increasingly concerned that he was not

going to reply at all.

Hearing the post announced, she rushed downstairs, only slowing down when she spotted her father accepting the letters and beginning to leaf through them.

“Ah, Antoinette, here,” her father said, passing her an envelope, “this one is for you.”

She took it and inspected it. It was Lucy's handwriting. She felt a little surge of joy, but then focused once again on her father's hands as he shuffled the letters. They seemed to receive a lot more post than before, and none of it ever seemed to be of any importance. Antoinette had wondered whether her parents were socializing more at first, but it did not seem to be the case. And still, their letters mounted up.

“Any news from Duke Godwin?” Antoinette asked as her father opened and peeked into the last letter.

“None as of yet. He is a busy man. Be patient,” her father replied absent-mindedly. “Now run along, I need to attend to these.” And with that he marched off to his study.

Antoinette found herself scowling. First they expected her to act like a lady, now they treated her like a child again. They ought to make up their minds already. Still, at least she had Lucy's letter.

Lucy's letter was not a disappointment. Far from it, Antoinette was glad to hear from her dear friend. But even as she opened it, she could not help but wonder where Duke Godwin's reply was. As she waited for breakfast in the drawing room, she opened Lucy's letter.

“My dearest Antoinette,

It was so lovely to hear from you again! And please do tell me of your suitor. You simply cannot tease me so, and then leave the matter unresolved. Whether he is your husband to be or just a daydream, I would love to hear all about him.

I ought to be home well in time for Christmas, thank goodness! Life in the school is dreadfully dull as usual. It is fine for girls, but no place for a young lady. Who knows? Perhaps in a few months I will be seeing a few suitors of my own. I hope courtship is all our favourite love stories make it out to be.

Yours dearly,

LF”

After reading the letter she felt Duke Godwin's silence far more acutely. He had to be avoiding her. There was simply no other explanation. Something she had said or done at the wedding had offended him, he had been too polite to say anything at the time, but when he had received her father's letter he had used it for kindling and gone about his daily routine, hoping to never hear from her again.

During breakfast Antoinette could barely eat. She felt saddened and sickened by her own actions. Her parents were probably right. She was too loud, too forward, too boisterous to be a young lady. She may have thought she was speeding matters along by dancing and talking with so many men, and introducing them to her parents. But she must have come across as too desperate, or too infantile, for any man to be interested in her.

She nudged her eggs around on her plate and sighed.

And, if that were the case, then perhaps she was not ready to marry after all? If what men wanted from marriage was something she could not offer, then-

Footsteps sounded in the doorway, and the footman walked in carrying an envelope.

“Someone was just here to deliver a message from Duke Godwin, sir,” the footman said, handing the envelope to Lord Byrd.

Antoinette's confidence soared, then crashed again. Everything depended on this letter. If he wished to see her, then all was well and she could continue being herself. But if he had rejected her... then everything she was doing could potentially be wrong, and need correcting before she saw another suitor.

Antoinette's heart fluttered as her parents read the letter. She needed to see it herself. “What does it say?” she asked, tapping her foot on the carpet again.

Her mother beamed. “Read it yourself,” she said, passing it to Antoinette.

“My esteemed Baron and Baroness Byrd,

Thank you for considering me, and my sincerest apologies for my lack of a reply. It seems your letter was lost among some household papers. I did not intend to cause yourselves, or your daughter, any undue distress.

As for the matter of courtship, I found your daughter quite charming at my friend, Duke Haskett's, wedding. I would very much like to see more of her, and therefore agree to court her.

I am presently a little busy to visit, however given a week, I shall come and see your family, and would appreciate any time I may spend in Antoinette's company.

Yours sincerely,

Duke Alexander Godwin."

Antoinette was over the moon. And yet... something still troubled her, but she could not work out what. She dismissed it as simple nerves. As her parents discussed their reply to Duke Godwin, she excused herself from the table and headed upstairs to tell Lucy of her new suitor.

"Lucy,

You would not believe my luck! The man I was writing about in my last letter has confirmed his interest. And he is no less than a Duke! He has promised that he will see me next week, and I look forward to spending this time with him.

I have only just begun courting in earnest, as my parents had not been convinced I was prepared until recently. However thus far I am finding it quite thrilling and romantic. I expect the romance to continue as I begin seeing my Duke more often. I know that he is a wealthy and extravagant man, albeit a somewhat shy one also. I believe that time spent with him will be unrivalled even by the most creative and passionate of romance novels.

I shall write anon, with details of our courtship,

Yours dearly,

Antoinette"

Finishing her letter, Antoinette was unsure what to do with herself. On the one hand, she knew that she had to be prepared for Duke Godwin. On the other hand, she had all of a week to do it in. For now, she supposed she would just need to post her letter and wait.

"We must make arrangements immediately," her mother's voice announced from the doorway.

"Arrangements?" Antoinette replied, blinking. "Whatever for?"

"For Duke Godwin," her mother replied with a slight sigh. "It may not be for a week, but one can never prepare too early to see a Duke. Now, first things first, we must go to town and buy you a dress."

Antoinette felt her attention drawn in as soon as her mother said this. Quite unlike her cousin Mary or her friend Lucy, Antoinette took great pleasure in all things fashionable and frivolous. Some artistic

sensibility in her made her drawn to dresses, to jewellery, to flowers and shoes and gloves. It was not about the cost of these items, but about the way they looked and felt on her body. She felt feminine, beautiful, and confident in them.

She understood that one could have too much of these things, and limited herself to what she could reasonably say she needed. After all, the goods of this earth are not forever. But, if her mother insisted she needed a new dress...

“I'll post my letter whilst we are in town,” Antoinette said with a broad smile.

Her mother smiled back. “I must confess, I do believe I am just as excited as you are,” she admitted. “A Duke! Why... nobody in our family had been so lucky as to marry a Duke for generations. And now your cousin is married to one, and you also stand to marry a Duke. It is quite the adventure.”

“Nothing is guaranteed, though,” Antoinette replied.

“Of course not,” her mother agreed. “But I trust in you to do your very best to impress and please him. I know it is a lot to ask of a girl who has not yet had a proper courtship. But opportunities such as this one are few and far between, and we cannot pass it up simply due to your inexperience.”

Antoinette found the trip to town therapeutic. She really could not stand to be indoors so much. It was driving her up the walls. Outside, in the fresh air, she felt revived, her stress dissipated, and her mind cleared. As she leafed through the catalogue of patterns the seamstress had, and lightly stroked the fabric samples to select her perfect dress, she felt fully prepared to face a courtship with Duke Godwin.

On the walk back home, her mother remarked on her daughter's sudden change of demeanour. “I have no understanding of it, but you truly are a different woman when you get out,” she said to her daughter.

“Whatever do you mean?” Antoinette replied.

“At home you are so full of energy, it is almost as though you cannot control your words before they leave your mouth, or your body as you pace, or bump into things. And yet after a morning of brisk walking, shopping, and talking, you are quite the lady,” her mother explained. “You carry yourself better, you speak more calmly, and you move more slowly and deliberately. I noticed this at the wedding also, but after today I can see it was no fluke.”

Antoinette nodded. “I do always feel so much better when I can get out of the house more.”

“You say that as though our home were a bad place to be. Do not forget how fortunate we are,” her mother chastised.

Antoinette shook her head. “It is not that. I know our home is a wonderful house, and that our lives are very much blessed. I simply... feel more at ease when I can do things outdoors.”

Her mother shook her head as they approached the garden gate. “Although you are my daughter, I fear I shall never truly understand you. The home is where a lady belongs, it is not a place to be feared or to escape from.”

Antoinette was about to counter her mother's statement, when they walked in through the door and found themselves face to face with a gentleman. He stood, holding his hat and cane, as though politely waiting for someone.

Antoinette paused, scrutinized his face for a second, then gasped.

He was the same strange man she had seen her father with nearly a week ago.

“You?” she said before she could think and stop herself.

The man looked taken aback. “Do I... know you... young lady?” he finally responded, looking her up and down as though desperately attempting to find something he found familiar about her.

Antoinette blushed. “Well, no. Not exactly. I just... I saw you speaking with my father the other day and have been curious as to who you are.”

“Antoinette!” her mother whispered harshly.

“My apologies,” she said with a hasty curtsy as she followed her mother out of the room.

Once behind closed doors, her mother let out an exasperated sigh. “Antoinette, this is exactly what I am referring to. You cannot speak in that manner to men with whom you've had no formal introduction.”

“I am sorry mother, but I could not help myself. I have wondered about that man since I first met him and father was so very secretive about him,” Antoinette replied.

“You must... Simply please remember that you are a lady,” her mother said with another sigh. She reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind her daughter's ear. “I know it is hard for you, but you are learning, and doing so well. Please, continue to make an effort.”

Antoinette nodded.

Heading back out, they saw Lord Byrd speaking with this strange gentleman. Antoinette once again noted that his clothes seemed a little cheaper than those worn by the men her family usually entertained. Yet he was, as he had been that day, impeccably groomed, and standing with his head high, like only a real gentleman could.

Her father looked up as the women walked towards the men. “Dinah, Antoinette, I would like you to meet Mr. Perry,” Lord Byrd began.

“Mr. Perry, this is my wife and daughter.”

Mr. Perry bowed. “Very pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Antoinette, as we had agreed you will have a few suitors to see before we can conclude who is the best option. Mr. Perry is one such suitor, and we would like for you to spend the afternoon with him,” her father explained.

Antoinette was not quite sure what to make of this arrangement. This man certainly did not meet her parents' usual lofty expectations, but her father had chosen him as an option and her mother was smiling and nodding, so he couldn't be a poor choice. Nevertheless... “Mr.” Perry? That was a far cry from a Duke!

Antoinette curtsied and smiled. “It would be my pleasure.”

Sitting with Mr. Perry in the garden, they sipped tea, neither of them were sure of what to say. Although there was silence, Antoinette did not mind it so much. He was the sort of brooding, unassuming young man she read about in her romance novels. Of course, the brooding, unassuming young man was usually a Prince of sorts, but still...

Their eyes locked and she glanced away, a little ashamed of how harshly she was judging him. He was a human being, after all! But didn't the conventions of courtship dictate she ought to judge him? It was the right, and normal, thing to do. But it felt so wrong to her when she caught herself doing it...

“I know I am not what you are familiar with,” Mr. Perry began with a slightly nervous tone to his voice.

Antoinette shook her head. “Not at all... I mean, you are nothing like the sort of men I am familiar with. But everyone deserves a chance.”

“Is that so?” Mr. Perry laughed nervously. “I bet you're asking yourself why your father chose a simple, plain young man as one of your suitors?”

Antoinette nodded. “Actually yes, I am,” she admitted.

“I have done some business with him in the past which has been successful. I am an international trader, you see. Spices, ivory, steel, anything Britain needs and has. As of late my deals have not been so successful, but I am building up, thanks to your father's investments,” Mr. Perry explained.

“That sounds... interesting...” Antoinette said.

“What are you really thinking?” Mr. Perry asked.

“Why would you decide to start courting when you are doing poorly, when you could have married so well, and so easily, when business was going well?” she asked.

Mr. Perry chuckled a little bit and blushed. “Well... I guess I am too busy when I am doing well, and too poor when I have the time.”

“And what made you think I would be interested in a man who is too busy half the time and too poor the rest?” Antoinette asked with a smile, to show she was only teasing.

“I did not, I am just seeing how lucky I am,” he replied.

“How lucky do you think you are? Or do you think that marrying an investor's daughter might sweeten him to forget your debts?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I saw you at the wedding the other day. You looked quite lovely and danced with so many. But... they were so well-dressed, so elegant. I felt it would be an insult to you to dance with me, in front of so many others, after you had been dancing with such high-status men.”

Antoinette shook her head back, “Not at all. It is always a pleasure to dance with a man. I feel one can learn much of a man from what he says, how he dances, and what he likes.”

“Is that so? You could read me like an open book?” Mr. Perry laughed. “I am doomed!”

Antoinette laughed back. “Do not worry so much. What I have read so far, I like.”

They locked eyes from across the table. Although he was a little quiet, a little young, a little nervous, and definitely no Duke, Antoinette couldn't help but feel there was something more to Mr. Perry. She had not noticed it before—indeed, she had not looked into his eyes before—but there was an intensity, a passion there, which she could not quite make sense of. Not yet.

“I would very much like to see you again,” Mr. Perry said with a polite smile.

“I would like that very much as well,” she said. “And I am not just being polite.”

Mr. Perry blushed again and, breaking the eye contact, had a sip of his tea.

She could not stop thinking of Mr. Perry all night, and through to the

next morning, even as she prepared for Duke Godwin's visit. There was something about Mr. Perry that was just... interesting. She would not say it made her heart flutter, or made her giddy. But it definitely made her want to know more about him, and see more of him. And it also definitely interfered with her sleep.

She could barely close her eyes without wondering what it meant to have someone on your mind so much, yet to be so sure you did not love them. If it meant anything at all...



If her afternoon with Mr. Perry had raised even the smallest of doubts, Lucy's letter on the morning of the visit immediately quelled them.

“My Dearest Antoinette,

I am overcome with joy that you have such a fine suitor! Although a man of status is not to my tastes, nor reasonably within my prospects, I understand how thrilling it must be to live a real life romance, just like the ones in our books! And do tell me everything that happens, I will not tell a soul about any misbehaviours you engage in.

Yours in jest,

L.F.”

In jest indeed! Antoinette had half a mind to write back to Lucy, telling her off for suggesting that Antoinette would be so irresponsible as to engage in “misbehaviours.” But she knew her friend only meant it as a joke, and could not think of how to respond in a way which would not lead to further joking and teasing.

But Lucy was absolutely right. Duke Alexander Godwin was an amazing opportunity for her, and not one she should take lightly. Someone like Mr. Perry may be interesting, but she ought not waste time on him if she wanted to marry a Duke and live out her fairytale romance.

With renewed confidence, Antoinette carefully selected the best accessories for her new dress and dressed herself. She knew she would not see Duke Godwin until the afternoon, so she put on a light shawl to protect her dress, and decided to leave the final touches of her makeup and jewellery until the very last minute.

Then, she attempted to busy herself reading. Or sewing. Or singing.

But nothing worked. He was far too much on her mind. Instead, she

decided it would be best for her to walk in the garden. At least that way she would expend some energy, and perhaps be more focused and better behaved when time came for her time with Duke Godwin.

Everything had to be perfect, herself included.

Re-entering the house, she looked at the clock. The walk had whiled away some time, and there were two hours to finish getting dressed. Although she was meticulous in her work, and created a true work of art on her body with her jewellery and makeup, when she was ready there was yet an hour more of waiting to pass. She sighed and sat by her window, watching the lane outside where the odd carriage rolled by on its way to the village or back.

Antoinette felt goosebumps rise on her skin when she heard the knock at the door. Why could she not calm her excitable nature? She was sure that a walk in the garden would ease her, but after only a couple of hours indoors she was already full of energy.

She took a deep breath and fought to retain her composure as she walked downstairs. Duke Godwin and her father were standing and talking in front of the fireplace, but both heads turned when she walked in. Her father smiled proudly, and yet she could see a faint hint of sadness in his eyes too, upon seeing his daughter dressed as a full lady. Duke Godwin's eyebrows raised and he drew a sharp breath upon seeing her much more finely and carefully dressed up, in much lighter, tighter, more fashionable clothes than at the wedding.

“I did not know Antoinette had a more elegant twin,” Duke Godwin joked.

Antoinette was not sure whether to be flattered that he had noticed her efforts, or insulted that he considered her usual attire less elegant. Did that mean he considered her inelegant? She dismissed the thought and curtsied. “Good afternoon, Duke Godwin. I am ready.”

“Excellent,” Duke Godwin replied. “Shall we go?”

“Go?” Antoinette asked.

“I thought your father would have mentioned. We are touring a local market. They have all manner of wonderful handmade trinkets and delectable goods, and they are sure to be producing some Christmas fare by now,” he explained.

“That is a little unorthodox,” Antoinette replied, glancing at her father.

“You will be escorted,” her father replied, in a tone which suggested

that he trusted and valued the Duke enough to give him this option.

“Besides, I simply cannot stand to be cooped up indoors all day,” Duke Godwin said. “Indoors is where all the formalities take place. The letters, the meetings... The outdoors is the complete opposite, and a fantastic opportunity to replenish my mental faculties in preparation for the next day.”

Antoinette felt her heart leap a little again. A kindred spirit! Could this man be any more perfect? “I too prefer to be outside,” she replied.

Duke Godwin raised an eyebrow. “Not very ladylike, is it? Should you not want to be indoors, with the children, tending the hearth?” For a moment Antoinette wondered whether he was teasing her again. But his voice and expression said he was definitely quite serious.

“With all due respect, Your Grace, I would prefer to be outdoors, with the children, perhaps gathering flowers or shopping,” Antoinette explained.

“Oh, I should hope you would keep yourself too busy for such frivolities,” he replied.

“Then why invite me to the market at all?” Antoinette asked.

“Because I wish to go,” Duke Godwin said.

At first Antoinette was irked. But she knew she needed to make an effort. Reminding herself that he was of a different world to hers, and would think and act differently, she simply smiled and nodded before they said their goodbyes and departed for the market.

Duke Godwin was the polar opposite of Mr. Perry, who, along with her frustration at the Duke, slowly left her mind over the course of the afternoon. He was just so busy, and loud, and proud. Naturally, to a woman so full of life as Antoinette both of them seemed a little shy and reserved. However only Mr. Perry seemed *too* shy, whereas Duke Godwin's shyness was simply endearing.

Antoinette enjoyed their walk amidst the market stalls, where hints of Christmas had already begun to appear amidst the Autumnal fare.

“It is always so lovely when the first mistletoe and nativities are brought out, is it not?” she asked Duke Godwin.

Duke Godwin nodded in agreement. “Indeed it is. It tells me that the season is truly beginning.” He suddenly stopped in front of a stall. Antoinette stopped also and looked at the wares. It was top to bottom displaying nothing but beautiful purses. “Come now, let's get into the

Christmas spirit," Duke Godwin insisted. "Pick a bag, any you like, and it shall be my gift to you for today."

Antoinette was not quite sure what to do. On the one hand, she had never been offered anything by anyone but her own family before. But, on the other hand, she knew that Duke Godwin was a very wealthy man, and suspected that it would be insulting to turn down a gift from him.

"I suppose I could do with a new purse," she said, forcing herself to select just the one from the stall. They were all so beautiful! So well made! Each one its own work of art, each one worth owning.

But Duke Godwin could see her eyes wandering up and down. "Nonsense. Pick as many as you like. The Good Lord knows I can afford the whole stall."

Antoinette blushed. "Well, in that case..."

She could not finish. Her eyes widened and she let out a shriek as she spotted an out of control coach, the horse foamed at the mouth and charged down the road, barely missing the next stall over. It barreled straight towards them.

Chapter 5

Antoinette felt her heart almost stop as the horse continued charging, knocking people out of the way and stepping on a man's arm, its cart swinging dangerously from side to side.

And yet before it could reach her she was swept up off her feet and placed on a shelf in the stall. It was all so sudden she hardly had time to take it in. From her impromptu perch she watched, wide-eyed and shaking, as Duke Godwin then proceeded to reach for the horse's reins and pull to the side. The horse slowed, but attempted to buck, then to rear. A small child who had not managed to get out of the horse's way curled up on the floor, hands over his head, face scrunched up.

Duke Godwin pulled the reins harshly, forcing the horse's great front hooves to change their path, narrowly missing the boy. A man swept in and picked up the child, carrying him out of harm's way. Meanwhile, Duke Godwin held fast onto the reins of the less panicked, but still nervous horse, as he took out a hunting knife and... slashed the harness which held the horse to the cart.

Free, the horse bucked once again. Duke Godwin dropped his knife and began patting the horse's neck and side, pulling hard down with the reins to prevent the horse from attempting to rear, shushing it gently. As the horse's rearing and bucking efforts reduced into twitches, Duke Godwin began to lead it, up and down, in circles, in the cleared space on the road. Much to the fascination of onlookers, Duke Godwin's approach slowly worked and this anxious, dangerous beast became placid.

Eventually, Duke Godwin drew the pacing to a halt and the horse stopped beside him, snorted, and looked around. Its ears stood up proud, but it did not resist as a couple of men walked up to it and affixed its blinkers and hay bag.

As soon as the cart had been firmly re-attached to the horse, there was the sound of clapping from the crowd, nervous at first, should the horse spook again, but growing into a true cascade of applause, loud and fast as rain on windowpanes.

Antoinette was not sure whether she was about to faint, cry, or kiss Duke Godwin, the hero of the hour. She decided it was best to begin by unassumingly sliding down from the bag stall and making sure her skirts were still about her ankles.

And yet... it was undeniable that Duke Godwin had just proven himself. As he turned and looked for her, he smiled and she grinned back at him. Walking up to her he looked her up and down. “Not even a scratch, thank goodness,” he remarked.

“I cannot say the same for yourself,” Antoinette replied, looking the Duke up and down. The reins had cut his hand, and his clothes were dirty from the dust and mud the horse kicked up. There was a rip in his coat and shirt, and a fairly large bruise appearing on the skin underneath. “I suppose it is to be expected that a hero would take a little battering,” she concluded. “Come, let us go home immediately. You need your wounds tending to, and some fresh clothes.”

He shook his head. “First things first... What purses do you want?”

“But you're injured!” Antoinette exclaimed.

“And I promised you a purse,” Duke Godwin replied with a chuckle.

Antoinette blushed. “Well, if you insist, I shall have...” She scanned the stall and her eyes landed on two which she had been comparing until the horse had arrived charging. “That one, and that one,” she replied.

“Very well,” Duke Godwin said, grinning and walking up to the stall. “Good sir, may I have those two purses over there? The blue one, and the one with the floral pattern.”

“For you, Sir? They're free,” replied the man behind the stall. “Had you not been there my entire stall would have been knocked into the mud by the horse. Not to mention the damage it may have dealt to my person.”

Duke Godwin shook his head. “Very kind of you, but I can afford it. And you need to make a living.”

The cordwainer nodded. “That I do. If you are sure, I shall accept your money.”

“I am most certain,” replied Duke Godwin, placing the coins in the man's hand and moving to take the two purses he had bought Antoinette. He halted in his tracks. “I am terribly sorry, but you shall have to carry them yourself. I do not wish to get blood on your new bags.”

Antoinette shook her head. “It is still bleeding? Come here.” She took out a handkerchief and folded it over into a crude bandage, using one side to wipe the dirt from his cut, then turning it over and tying it around his hand so that the clean side faced the wound. “It will do until we are home,” she replied with a slight smile.

“Miss Byrd,” Duke Godwin said in a hushed voice.

“Yes, Your Grace?” she replied.

“You may release my hand now,” he said with a smile.

Antoinette blushed fiercely and let go of Duke Godwin's hand. “I am so sorry!” she exclaimed. “I did not mean to, I just... I simply was...”

“You talk too much.” Duke Godwin's smile did not leave his face as he passed her first one, then the other purse to carry.

“Will I receive nothing but criticism?” Antoinette said without thinking.

Duke Godwin chuckled. “Well, you did a nice job on the bandage.”

She knew he was still teasing her, but somehow it made her heart soar to see him so carefree, so proud... He was everything she had dreamed of as she read those romantic tales about princes and princesses. “Come, let's go home,” she said, lifting her hand.

Duke Godwin offered his arm and she slipped her dainty, gloved fingers around it as they marched back up the lane, towards home.

Once back, Antoinette could not hold back on the thrilling rescue her suitor had performed. As soon as a servant was washing Duke Godwin's wound and Lady Byrd was sitting beside the three of them to listen, Antoinette told her mother all about the event.

“I had seen nothing like it before in my life,” Antoinette concluded. “It was like he was a hero out of a Greek epic.”

“You flatter me, Miss Byrd, you really do,” Duke Godwin replied.

“Not at all!” Antoinette insisted. “There are plenty of witnesses to your heroics and I am sure all will agree you went above and beyond what the typical man can do.”

Duke Godwin smiled. “I do my best.”

“Now, you simply must stay for dinner,” Lady Byrd replied. “After the eventful afternoon you both had, I am sure you will need to replenish your strength.”

“After all that excitement? I could hardly eat a thing,” replied Antoinette.

“Well, you must try,” said her mother sternly.

“I assume that if I say I am too busy to stay for dinner you will ignore my pleas and usher me into the dining room?” Duke Godwin joked.

“Perhaps,” replied Lady Byrd, “though I doubt a grown man such as yourself would heed my maternal warnings.”

“Nonsense, every man needs a mother, Lady Byrd,” Duke Godwin replied. “I shall dine with you tonight, but I must depart immediately after.”

At dinner it was easy for Antoinette to see the strong rapport Duke Godwin had with her parents. They conversed, laughed, and seemed as though they truly belonged together, as a family. It made her heart beat as hard as ever to see how well-rounded this man was. He really belonged in a fairytale. She barely touched her food, instead staring at him and pondering in what other ways he may be perfect.

After dinner she saw him leave and then made her excuses to go upstairs and digest. Exhilarated, Antoinette collapsed onto her bed and stared at the ceiling. This day had been everything she had hoped for in courtship. Well, except perhaps for almost getting trampled to death by a horse. But such heroics, such a good nature, such generosity and humility... And to boot he was a great fit for her parents regarding temperament, and a handsome and wealthy Duke. What more could a girl ask for?

Duke Godwin... this man was definitely the one to marry.



Antoinette was deeply disappointed to hear that not only was Duke Godwin away for the week, but that due to a little confusion the post that should have been delivered to them was redirected to their old summer house, and may take some time to recover. What is more, her father was away on business, her mother had come down with the flu and needed rest, Mary was still busy, and the weather had been dreadful for two days.

Sitting in the library, watching the rain splash against the window panes, Antoinette sighed melodramatically. She detested not being able to socialize. Being shut up indoors was one thing, but having absolutely nobody to speak to was some sort of torture to her. She had

even attempted to make conversation with the servants. But for some reason there were fewer servants than usual about the house, and those she had seen were all busy stoking fires, tending to her mother, and addressing a leak in the kitchen.

Antoinette picked her book back up and stared at the words on the pages without reading them. She put the book back down, sighed again, and all but slammed her forehead into the window sill. This was far too boring. She wished one of her siblings were there to keep her company. Or for a puppy. Or a cat. Anything would be nice.

She resolved to visit her mother and demand a pet cat to keep her company. It was the least that she would accept.

Entering the room, she saw that there was one maid watching over her mother, one tidying the room, and another one standing by in case she were needed. They all curtsied and bid her a good morning before resuming their work.

Antoinette sat down in the chair beside her mother's bed. “You look much better,” she said.

“And yet the doctor says it will be a week before the worst of this dreadful flu is over,” Lady Byrd replied. “Is the house being managed well in my absence?”

Antoinette nodded. “The housekeeper is doing a fantastic job, I barely need to direct her. Other than that leak in the kitchen, but we are pretty certain a brick will need replacing once the rain has passed.”

Lady Byrd nodded. “That is good to hear. I am sure the brick can be handled in good time.”

“And mother, I have been meaning to ask you-”

Antoinette was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Come in,” said Lady Byrd quietly, “I am decent.”

It was a young messenger, soaked from head to toe. “Forgive my appearance, however there was nobody to deliver the letter to your quarters after I was let in.” He bowed deeply. “This is an urgent letter from the Duke of Hamilton,” he continued, still standing in the doorway and presenting an envelope to the maid who had walked up to him.

“Thank you very much,” Lady Byrd replied. “Annie, be a dear and make sure that this young man gets a warm dry towel and a change of clothes.”

“Of course Madam,” the maid replied, handing Lady Byrd the letter before escorting the messenger out.

“Urgent news?” Antoinette said, peering at the letter as her mother opened it. “Oh, I hope it is nothing too serious.”

Lady Byrd's expression as she read the letter turned from concern to humoured. “Nothing serious whatsoever,” she replied with a slight giggle. “He is holding a charity ball, to raise money to buy presents for ill children this Christmas. He says he could very well do it himself, but that he loves an excuse for a ball, and he believes it is a great opportunity for all his friends to show a little generosity and thoughtfulness before they begin to indulge in the usual revelry.”

Antoinette laughed a bit too. “Why did they say it was urgent, then?”

“Because the ball is tomorrow night, and he was concerned that people may not see the letter until too late otherwise,” Lady Byrd replied.

“Tomorrow night?” Antoinette replied. “Whatever shall I wear and— Oh,” she concluded, looking to her mother. “I... On second thoughts I am not too interested in going. Balls are overrated.”

Lady Byrd sighed. “It's true, you would have nobody to accompany you at such short notice... But I suppose I can make an exception so long as you are escorted by a trustworthy and capable servant, and return no later than seven.”

Antoinette felt a sense of trepidation during the carriage journey to the manor. It would be the first time she would see any building from Duke Godwin's estate, not to mention the first time she attended a party unescorted by her parents. She had a lump in her throat and her heart was pounding hard in her chest.

She may be a social person, but, if anything, that made her predicament worse. She was headed to an unfamiliar environment, full of unfamiliar people, where she would greatly wish to talk and dance and make merry... but how could she if she did not know anyone? She knew that her best bet would be to find Duke Godwin and stay close to him. That way she would eventually be introduced to a few people, and enjoy plenty of freedom to mingle.

As her carriage pulled up into the courtyard, the magnificence of the manor took her breath away. It towered over the grounds like a giant,

its bright lights making it glimmer in contrast to the dark and rainy gardens. Antoinette, worried she would ruin her shoes, quickly made her way up the stairs and towards that beacon of light, her maid following close behind her.

As soon as she stepped up to the open door, she realized she would have her work cut out for her if she were to find Duke Godwin. The crowd was as thick as a busy London shopping street, very still, and everyone there seemed to be someone. The clothes were extravagant, the décor was magnificent, and the air was full of the rich aroma of various foods, though Antoinette could not even see where the food had been laid out. The quiet conversation of several hundred people added up to a mild roar, like an ocean in the distance.

She felt her heart race with excitement and fear at once.



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Abby Ayles was born in the northern city of Manchester, England, but currently lives in Charleston, South Carolina, with her husband and their three cats. She holds a Master's degree in History and Arts and worked as a history teacher in middle school.

Her greatest interest lies in the era of Regency and Victorian England and Abby shares her love and knowledge of these periods with many readers in her newsletter.

In addition to this she has also written her first romantic novel, **The Duke's Secrets**, which is set in the era and is available for free on her website. As one reader commented – *'Abby's writing makes you travel back in time…'*

When she has time to herself, Abby enjoys going to the theatre, reading and watching documentaries about Regency and Victorian England.

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